HARRY LEWIS

"LOOK OUT! THE SECOND CAT!" YELLED PAUL.

The Banner Boy Scouts Snowbound

OR

A Tour *on* Skates *and* Iceboats

By GEORGE A. WARREN

AUTHOR OF "THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS," "THE MUSKET BOYS OF OLD BOSTON," ETC.

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PREFACE

DEAR BOYS:—

Once more it is my privilege to offer you a new volume wherein I have endeavored to relate further interesting adventures in which the members of Stanhope Troop of Boy Scouts take part. Most of my readers, I feel sure, remember Paul, Jud, Bobolink, Jack and many of the other characters, and will gladly greet them as old friends.

To such of you who may be making the acquaintance of these manly young chaps for the first time I can only say this. I trust your interest in their various doings along the line of scoutcraft will be strong enough to induce you to secure the previous volumes in this series in order to learn at first hand of the numerous achievements they have placed to their credit.

The boys comprising the original Red Fox Patrol won the beautiful banner they own in open competition with other rival organizations. From that day, now far in the past, Stanhope Troop has been known as the Banner Boy Scouts. Its posses-

sion has always served as an inspiration to Paul and his many staunch comrades. Every time they see its silken folds unfurled at the head of their growing marching line they feel like renewing the vows to which they so willingly subscribed on first joining the organization.

Many of their number, too, are this day proudly wearing on their chests the medals they have won through study, observation, service, thrift, or acts of heroism, such as saving human life at the risk of their own.

I trust that all my many young readers will enjoy the present volume fully as much as they did those that have appeared before now. Hoping, then, to meet you all again before a great while in the pages of another book; and with best wishes for every lad who aspires to climb the ladder of leadership in his home troop, believe me,

Cordially yours,

GEORGE A. WARREN.

THE BANNER BOY SCOUTS SNOWBOUND

CHAPTER I

ON THE FROZEN BUSHKILL

"WATCH Jack cut his name in the ice, fellows!"

"I wish I could do the fancy stunts on skates he manages to pull off. It makes me green with envy to watch Jack Stormways do that trick."

"Oh, shucks! what's the use of saying that, Wallace Carberry, when everybody knows your strong suit is long-distance skating? The fact is both the Carberry twins are as much at home on the ice as I am when I get my knees under the supper table."

"That's kind of you to throw bouquets my way, Bobolink. But, boys, stop and think. Here it is—only four days now to Christmas, and the scouts haven't made up their minds yet where to spend the glorious holidays."

"Y-y-yes, and b-b-by the same token, this year we're g-g-going to g-g-get a full three-weeks' va-

cation in the b-b-bargain, b-b-because they have t-t-to overhaul the f-f-furnaces."

"Hold on there, Bluff Shipley! If you keep on falling all over yourself like that you'll have to take a whole week to rest up."

"All the same," remarked the boy who answered to the odd name of Bobolink, "it's high time we scouts settled that important matter for good."

"The assistant scoutmaster, Paul Morrison, has called a meeting at headquarters for to-night, you understand, boys," said the fancy skater, who had just cut the name of Paul Morrison in the smooth, new ice of the Bushkill river.

"We must arrange the programme then," observed Bobolink, "because it will take a couple of days to get everything ready for the trip, no matter where we go."

"Huh!" grunted another skater, "I can certainly see warm times ahead for the cook at *your* house, Bobolink, provided you've still got that ferocious appetite to satisfy."

"Oh! well, Tom Betts," laughed the other, "I notice that you seldom take a back seat when the grub is being passed around. As for me I'm proud of my stowage ability. A good appetite is one of the greatest blessings a growing boy can have."

"Pity the poor father though," chuckled Wal-

lace Carberry, "because he has to pay the freight."

"Just to go back to the important subject," said Bluff Shipley, who could speak as clearly as any one when not excited, "where do you think the scouts will hike to for their Christmas holidays?"

"Well, now, a winter camp on Rattlesnake Mountain wouldn't be such a bad stunt," suggested Tom Betts, quickly.

"For my part," remarked Bobolink, "I'd rather like to visit Lake Tokala again, and see what Cedar Island looks like in the grip of Jack Frost. The skating on that sheet of water must be great."

"We certainly did have a royal good time there last summer," admitted Jack, reflectively.

"All the same," ventured Tom, "I think I know one scout who couldn't be coaxed or hired to camp on Cedar Island again."

"Meaning Curly Baxter," Bobolink went on to say scornfully, "who brazenly admits he believes in ghosts, and couldn't be convinced that the place wasn't haunted."

"Curly won't be the only fellow to back out," suggested Jack. "While we have a membership of over thirty on the muster roll of Stanhope Troop, it isn't to be expected that more than half of them will agree to make the outing with us."

"Too much like hard work for some of the boys," asserted Tom.

"I know a number who say they'd like to be with us, but their folks object to a winter camp," Wallace announced. "So if we muster a baker's dozen we can call ourselves lucky."

"Of course it must be a real snow and ice hike this time," suggested Bluff.

"To be sure—and on skates at that!" cried Wallace, enthusiastically.

"Oh! I hope there's a chance to use our ice-boats too!" sighed Tom Betts, who late that fall had built a new flier, and never seemed weary of sounding the praises of his as yet untried "Speed-away."

"Perhaps we may—who knows?" remarked Jack, mysteriously.

The others, knowing that the speaker was the nearest and dearest chum of Paul Morrison, assistant scoutmaster of Stanhope Troop of Boy Scouts, turned upon him eagerly on hearing this suggestive remark.

"You know something about the plans, Jack!"

"Sure he does, and he ought to give us a hint in the bargain!"

"Come, take pity on us, won't you, Jack?"

But the object of all this pleading only shook his head and smiled as he went on to say:

"I'm bound to secrecy, fellows, and you wouldn't have me break my word to our patrol

leader. Just hold your horses a little while longer and you'll hear everything. We're going to talk it over to-night and settle the matter once for all. Now let's drop the subject. Here's a new wrinkle I'm trying out."

With that Jack started to spin around on his skates, and fairly dazzled his mates with the wonderful ability he displayed as a fancy skater.

While they are thus engaged a few words of explanation may not come in amiss.

Stanhope Troop consisted of three full patrols, with another almost completed. Though in the flood tide of success at the time we make the acquaintance of the boys in this volume there were episodes in the past history of the troop to which the older scouts often referred with mingled emotions of pride and wonder.

The present status of the troop had not been maintained without many struggles. Envious rivals had tried to make the undertaking a failure, while doubting parents had in many cases to be shown that association with the scouts would be a thing of unequalled advantage to their boys.

Those who have read the previous books of this series have doubtless already formed a warm attachment for the members of the Red Fox Patrol and their friends, and will be greatly pleased to follow their fortunes again. For the

benefit of those who are making their acquaintance for the first time it may be stated that besides Jack Stormways and the four boys who were with him on the frozen Bushkill this December afternoon, the roster of the Red Fox Patrol counted three other names.

These were Paul Morrison, the leader, the other Carberry twin, William by name, and a boy whom they called "Nuthin," possibly because his name chanced to be Albert Cypher.

As hinted at in the remarks that flew between the skaters circling around, many of the members of the troop had spent a rollicking vacation the previous summer while aboard a couple of motor boats loaned to them by influential citizens of their home town. The strange adventures that had befallen the scouts on this cruise through winding creeks and across several lakes have been given in the pages of the volume preceding this book, called "The Banner Boy Scouts Afloat; Or, The Secret of Cedar Island."

Ever since their return from that cruise the boys had talked of little else; and upon learning that the Christmas holidays would be lengthened this season the desire to take another tour had seized upon them.

After Jack so summarily shut down upon the subject no one ventured to plead with him any

longer. All knew that he felt bound in honor to keep any secret he had been entrusted with by the assistant scoutmaster—for Paul often had to act in place of Mr. Gordon, a young traveling salesman, who could not be with the boys as much as he would have liked.

Jack had just finished cutting the new figure, and his admirers were starting to give vent to their delight over his cleverness when suddenly there came a strange roaring sound that thrilled every one of them through and through. It was as if the frozen river were breaking up in a spring thaw. Some of the boys even suspected that there was danger of being swallowed up in such a catastrophe, and had started to skate in a frenzy of alarm for the shore when the voice of Bobolink arose above the clamor.

"Oh! look there, will you, fellows?" he shouted, pointing a trembling finger up the river. "The old ice-house has caved in, just as they feared it would. See the ice cakes sliding everywhere! And I saw men and girls near there just five minutes ago. They may be caught under all that wreckage for all we know! Jack, what shall we do about it?"

"Come on, every one of you!" roared Jack Stormways, as he set off at full speed. "This means work for the scouts! To the rescue, boys! Hurry! hurry!"

CHAPTER II

WHEN THE OLD ICE-HOUSE FELL

NEVER before in the recollection of any Stanhope boy had winter settled in so early as it had this year. They seldom counted on having their first skate on the new ice before Christmas, and yet for two weeks now some of the most daring had been tempting Providence by venturing on the surface of the frozen Bushkill.

The ice company had built a new house the preceding summer, though the old one was still fairly well filled with a part of the previous season's great crop. Its sides had bulged out in a suspicious manner, so that many had predicted some sort of catastrophe, but somehow the old building had weathered every gale, though it leaned to the south sadly. The company apparently hoped it would hold good until they had it emptied during the next summer, when they intended to build another new structure on the spot.

As the five boys started to skate at utmost speed up the river they heard a medley of sounds.

A panic had evidently struck such boys and girls as were skimming over the smooth ice in protected bayous near the ice-houses. Instead of hurrying to the assistance of those who may have been caught in the fallen timbers of the wrecked building they were for the most part fleeing from the scene, some of them shrieking with terror.

Several men who had been employed near by could be seen standing and staring. It looked as though they hardly knew what to do.

If ever there was an occasion where sound common sense and a readiness to grasp a situation were needed it seemed to be just then. And, fortunately, Jack Stormways was just the boy to meet the conditions.

He sped up the river like an arrow from the bow, followed by the four other scouts. The frightened girls who witnessed their passage always declared that never had they seen Stanhope boys make faster speed, even in a race where a valuable prize was held out as a lure to the victor.

As he bore down upon the scene of confusion Jack took it all in. Those who were floundering amidst the numerous heavy cakes of ice must engage their attention without delay. He paid little heed to the fortunate ones who were able to be on their feet, since this fact alone proved that they could not have been seriously injured.

Several, however, were not so fortunate, and Jack's heart seemed to be almost in his throat when he saw that two of the skaters lay in the midst of the scattered cakes of ice as though painfully injured.

"This way, boys!" shouted the boy in the van as they drew near the scene of the accident. "Bluff, you and Wallace turn and head for that one yonder. Bobolink, come with me—and Tom Betts."

Five seconds later he was bending over a small girl who lay there groaning and looking almost as white as the snow upon the hills around Stanhope.

"It's little Lucy Stackpole!" gasped Tom, as he also arrived. "Chances are she was hit by one of these big ice cakes when they flew around!"

Jack looked up.

"Yes, I'm afraid she's been badly hurt, fellows. It looks to me like a compound fracture of her right leg. She ought to be taken home in a hurry. See if you can round up a sled somewhere, and we'll put her on it."

"Here's Sandy Griggs and Lub Ketcham with just the sort of big sled we need!" cried Tom Betts, as he turned and beckoned to a couple of stout lads who evidently belonged to one of the other patrols, since they wore the customary campaign hats of the scouts.

These boys had by now managed to recover from their great alarm, and in response to the summons came hurrying up, anxious to be of service, as true scouts always are.

Jack, who had been speaking to the terrified girl, trying to soothe her as best he could, proceeded in a business-like fashion to accomplish the duty he had in hand.

"Two of you help me lift Lucy on to the sled," he said. "We will have to fasten her in some way so there'll be no danger of her slipping. Then Sandy and Lub will drag her to her home. On the way try to get Doctor Morrison over the 'phone so he can meet you there. The sooner this fracture is attended to the better."

"You could do it yourself, Jack, if it wasn't so bitter cold out here," suggested Tom Betts, proudly, for next to Paul Morrison himself, whose father was the leading physician of Stanhope, Jack was known to be well up in all matters connected with first aid to the injured.

They lifted the suffering child tenderly, and placed her on the comfortable sled. Both the newcomers were only too willing to do all they could to carry out the mission of mercy that had been entrusted to their charge.

"We'll get her home in short order, Jack, never fear," said Sandy Griggs, as he helped fasten an

extra piece of rope around the injured girl, so that she might not slip off the sled.

"Yes, and have the doctor there in a jiffy, too," added Lub, who, while a clumsy chap, in his way had a very tender heart and was as good as gold.

"Then get a move on you, fellows," advised Jack. "And while speed is all very good, safety comes first every time, remember."

"Trust us, Jack!" came the ready and confident reply, as the two scouts immediately began to seek a passage among the far-flung ice-cakes that had been so suddenly released from their year's confinement between the walls of the dilapidated ice-house.

Only waiting to see them well off, Jack and the other two once more turned toward the scene of ruin.

"See, the boys have managed to get the other girl on her feet!" exclaimed Bobolink, with a relieved air; "so I reckon she must have been more scared than hurt, for which I'm right glad. What next, Jack? Say the word and we'll back you to the limit."

"We must take a look around the wreck of the ice-house," replied the other, "though I hardly believe any one could have been inside at the time it fell."

"Whew, I should surely hope not!" cried Tom;

"for the chances are ten to one he'd be crushed as flat as a pancake before now, with all that timber falling on him. I wouldn't give a snap of my fingers for his life, Jack."

"Let's hope then there's no other victim," said Jack. "If there is none, it will let the ice company off easier than they really deserve for allowing so ramshackle a building to stand, overhanging the river just where we like to do most of our skating every winter."

"Suppose we climb around the timbers and see if we can hear any sound of groaning," suggested Bobolink, suiting the action to his words.

Several men from the other ice-house reached the spot just then.

Jack turned to them as a measure of saving time. If there were no men working in the wrecked building at the time it fell there did not seem any necessity for attempting to move any of the twisted timbers that lay in such a confused mass.

"Hello! Jan," he called out as the panting laborers arrived. "It was a big piece of luck that none of you were inside the old ice-house when it collapsed just now."

The man whom he addressed looked blankly at the boy. Jack could see that he was laboring under renewed excitement.

"Look here! was there any one in the old building, do you know, Jan?" he demanded.

"I ban see Maister Garrity go inside yoost afore she smash down," was the startling reply.

The boys stared at each other. Mr. Thomas Garrity was a very rich and singular citizen of Stanhope.

Finally Bobolink burst out with:

"Say, you know Mr. Garrity is one of the owners of these ice-houses, fellows. I guess he must have come up here to-day to see for himself if the old building was as rickety as people said."

"Huh! then I guess he found out all right," growled Tom Betts.

"Never mind that now," said Jack, hastily. "Mr. Garrity never had much use for the scouts, but all the same he's a human being. We've got our duty cut out for us plainly enough."

"Guess you mean we must clear away this trash with the help of these men here, Jack," suggested Wallace, eagerly.

"Just what I had in mind," confessed Jack. "But before we start in let's all listen and see if we can hear anything like a groan."

All of them stood in an expectant attitude, straining their hearing to the utmost.

Presently the listeners plainly caught the sound of a groan.

CHAPTER III

THE RESCUE

"JACK, he's here under all this stuff!" called out Bobolink, excitedly.

"Poor old chap," said Wallace. "I wouldn't like to give much for his chance of getting out of the scrape with his life."

"And to think," added Bluff, soberly, "that after all the protestations made by the company that the old house couldn't fall, it trapped one of the big owners when it smashed down. It's mighty queer, it strikes me."

"Keep still again," warned Jack. "I want to call out and see if Mr. Garrity can hear me."

"A bully good scheme, Jack!" asserted Bobolink. "If we can locate him in that way it may save us a heap of hard work dragging these timbers around."

Jack dropped flat on his face, and, placing his mouth close to the wreckage where it seemed worst, called aloud:

"Hello! Mr. Garrity, can you hear me?"

"Yes! Oh, yes!" came the faint response from somewhere below.

"Are you badly hurt, sir?" continued the scout.

"I don't know—I believe not, but a beam is keeping tons and tons from falling on me. I am pinned down here, and can hardly move. Hurry and get some of these timbers off before they fall and crush me!"

Every word came plainly to their ears now. Evidently, Mr. Garrity, understanding that relief was at hand, began to feel new courage. Jack waited for no more.

"I reckon I've located him, boys," he told the others, "and now we've got to get busy."

"Only tell us what to do, Jack," urged Wallace, "and there are plenty of willing hands here for the work, what with these strong men and the rest of the boys."

Indeed, already newcomers were arriving, some of them being people who had been passing along the turnpike near by in wagons or sleighs at the time the accident happened, and who hastened to the spot in order to render what assistance they could.

Jack seemed to know just how to go about the work. If he had been in the house-wrecking business for years he could hardly have improved upon his system.

"We've got to be careful, you understand, fellows," he told the others as they labored strenuously to remove the upper timbers from the pile, "because that one timber he mentioned is the key log of the jam. As long as it holds he's safe from being crushed. Here, don't try that beam yet, men. Take hold of the other one. And Bobolink and Wallace, help me lift this section of shingles from the roof!"

So Jack went on to give clear directions. He did not intend that any new accident should be laid at their door on account of too much haste. Better that the man who was imprisoned under all this wreckage should remain there a longer period than that he lose his life through carelessness. Jack believed in making thorough work of anything he undertook; and this trait marked him as a clever scout.

As others came to add to the number of willing workers the business of delving into the wreck of the ice-house proceeded in a satisfactory manner. Once in a while Jack would call a temporary halt while he got into communication with the unfortunate man they were seeking to assist.

"He seems to be all right so far, fellows," was the cheering report he gave after this had happened for the third time; "and I think we'll be able to reach him in a short time now."

"As sure as you're born we will, Jack!" announced Bobolink, triumphantly; "for I can see the big timber he said was acting as a buffer above him. Hey! we've got to be extra careful now, because one end of that beam is balanced ever so delicately, and if it gets shoved off its anchorage—good-bye to Mr. Garrity!"

"Yes," came from below the wreckage, "be very careful, please, for it's just as you say."

Jack was more than ever on the alert as the work continued. He watched every move that was made, and often warned those who strained and labored to be more cautious.

"In five minutes or so we ought to be able to get something under that loose end of the big timber, Jack," suggested Bobolink, presently.

"In less time than that," he was told. "And here's the very prop to slip down through that opening. I think I can reach it right now, if you stop the work for a bit."

He pushed the stout post carefully downward, endeavoring to adjust it so that it was bound to catch and hold the timber should the latter break away from its frail support at that end. When Bobolink saw him get up from his knees a minute later he did not need to be told that Jack's endeavor had been a success, for the satisfied smile on the other's face told as much.

"Now let the good work go on with a rush!" called out Jack. "Not so much danger now, because I've put a crimp in that timber's threat to fall. It's securely wedged. Everybody get busy."

Jack led in the work himself, and the way they removed the heavy beams, many of them splintered or broken in the downward rush of the building, was surely a sight worth seeing. At least some of the town people who came up just then felt they had good reason to be proud of the Banner Boy Scouts, who on other notable occasions had brought credit to the community.

"I can see him now!" exclaimed Bobolink; and indeed, only a few more weighty fragments remained to be lifted off before Jack would be able to drop down into the cavity and assist the prisoner at close quarters.

Five minutes later the workers managed to release Mr. Garrity, and Jack helped him out of his prison. The old gentleman looked considerably the worse for his remarkable experience. There was blood upon his cheek, and he kept caressing one arm as though it pained him considerably.

Still his heart was filled with thanksgiving as he stared around at the pile of torn timbers, and considered what a marvelous escape his had been.

"Let me take a look at your arm, sir," said

Jack, who feared that it had been broken, because a beam had pinned the gentleman by his arm to the ground.

Mr. Garrity, who up to that time had paid very little attention to the Boy Scout movement that had swept over that region of the eastern country like wildfire, looked at the eager, boyish faces of his rescuers. It could be seen that he was genuinely affected on noticing that most of them wore the badges that distinguish scouts the world over.

"I hope my wrist is not broken, though even that would be a little price to pay for my temerity in entering that shaky old building," he ventured to say as he allowed Jack to examine his arm.

"I'm glad to tell you, sir," said the boy, quickly, "that it is only a bad sprain. At the worst you will be without the use of that hand for a month or two."

"Then I have great reason to be thankful," declared Mr. Garrity, solemnly. "Perhaps this may be intended for a lesson to me. And, to begin with, I want to say that I believe I owe my very life to you boys. I can never forget it. Others, of course, might have done all they could to dig me out, but only a long-headed boy, like Jack Stormways here, would have thought to keep that timber from falling and crushing me just when escape seemed certain."

He went around shaking hands with each one of the boys, of course using his left arm, since the right was disabled for the time being. Jack deftly made a sling out of a red bandana handkerchief, which he fastened around the neck of Mr. Garrity, and then gently placed the bruised hand in this.

"Was any other person injured when the ice-house collapsed?" asked Mr. Garrity, anxiously.

"A couple of girls were struck by some of the big cakes flung far and wide," explained Bobolink. "Little Lucy Stackpole has a broken leg. We sent her home on a sled, and the doctor will soon be at her house, sir."

"That is too bad!" declared the part owner of the building, frowning. "I hoped that the brunt of the accident had fallen on my shoulders alone. Of course, the company will be liable for damages, as well as the doctor's bill; and I suppose we deserve to be hit pretty hard to pay for our stupidity. But I am glad it is no worse."

"Excuse me, Mr. Garrity, but perhaps you had better have that swelling wrist attended to as soon as possible," remarked Jack. "You have some bruises, too, that are apt to be painful for several days. There is a carriage on the road that might be called on to take you home."

"Thank you, Jack, I will do as you say," replied

the one addressed. "But depend on it I mean to meet you boys again, and that at a very early date."

"We're going to be away somewhere on a mid-winter hike immediately after Christmas, sir," Bobolink thought it best to explain. Somehow deep down in his heart he was already wondering whether this remarkable rescue of Mr. Garrity might not develop into some sort of connection with their partly formed plans.

"Yes," added Bluff, eagerly, suddenly possessed by the same hope, "and it's all going to be settled to-night when we have our monthly meeting in the big room under the church. We'd be pleased to have you drop in and see us, sir. Lots of the leading citizens of Stanhope have visited our rooms from time to time, but I don't remember ever having seen you there, Mr. Garrity."

"Thank you for the invitation, my lad," said the other, smiling grimly. "Perhaps I shall avail myself of it, and I might possibly have something of interest to communicate to you and your fellow scouts," and waving his hand to them he walked away.

CHAPTER IV

A QUICK RETURN FOR SERVICES RENDERED

THAT night turned out clear and frosty. Winter having set in so early seemed bent on keeping up its unusual record. The snow on the ground crackled underfoot in the fashion dear to the heart of every boy who loves outdoor sports.

Overhead, the bright moon, pretty well advanced, hung in space. It was clearly evident that no one need think of carrying a lantern with him to the meeting place on such a glorious night.

The Boy Scouts of Stanhope had been fortunate enough to be given the use of a large room under the church with the clock tower. On cold nights this was always heated for them, so that they found it a most comfortable place in which to hold their animated meetings.

There was a large attendance on this occasion, for while possibly few among the members of the troop could take advantage of this midwinter trip into the wilds, every boy was curious to know all the details.

In this same spacious room there was fitted up a gymnasium for the use of the boys one night a week, and many of them availed themselves of the privilege. As this was to be a regular business meeting, however, the apparatus had been drawn aside so as not to be in the way.

As the roster was being called it might be just as well to give the full membership of the troop so that the reader may be made acquainted with the chosen comrades of Jack and Paul.

The Red Fox Patrol, which contained the "veterans" of the organization, was made up of the following members:

Paul Morrison; Jack Stormways; Bobolink, the official bugler; Bluff Shipley, the drummer of the troop; "Nuthin" Cypher; William Carberry; Wallace, his twin brother; and Tom Betts. Paul, as has been said, was patrol leader, and served also as assistant scout-master when Mr. Gordon was absent from town.

In the second division known as the Gray Fox Patrol were the following:

Jud Elderkin, patrol leader; Joe Clausin, Andy Flinn, Phil Towns, Horace Poole, Bob Tice, Curly Baxter, and Cliff Jones.

The Black Fox Patrol had several absentees, but when all were present they answered to their names as below:

Frank Savage, leader; Billie Little, Nat Smith, Sandy Griggs, "Old" Dan Tucker, "Red" Collins, "Spider" Sexton, and last but not least in volume of voice, "Gusty" Bellows.

A fourth patrol that was to be called the Silver Fox was almost complete, lacking just three members; and those who made up this were:

George Hurst, leader; "Lub" Ketcham, Barry Nichols, Malcolm Steele and a new boy in town by the name of Archie Fletcher.

Apparently, the only business of importance before the meeting was in connection with the scheme to take a midwinter outing, something that was looked upon as unique in the annals of the association.

The usual order of the meeting was hurried through, for every one felt anxious to hear what sort of proposition the assistant scout-master intended to spread before the meeting for approval.

"I move we suspend the rules for to-night, and have an informal talk for a change!" said Bobolink, when he had been recognized by the chair.

A buzz of voices announced that the idea was favorably received by many of those present; and, accordingly, the chairman, no other than Paul himself, felt constrained to put the motion after it had been duly seconded. He did so with a smile, well knowing what Bobolink's object was.

"You have all heard the motion that the rules be suspended for the remainder of the evening," he went on to say, "so that we can have a heart-to-heart talk on matters that concern us just now. All in favor say aye!"

A rousing chorus of ayes followed.

"Contrary, no!" continued Paul, and as complete silence followed he added hastily: "The motion is carried, and the regular business meeting will now stand adjourned until next month."

"Now let's hear what you've been hatching up for us, Paul?" called out Bobolink.

"So say we all, Paul!" cried half a dozen eager voices, and the boys left their seats to crowd around their leader.

"I only hope it's Rattlesnake Mountain we're headed for!" exclaimed Tom Betts, who had a warm feeling in his boyish heart for that particular section of country, where once upon a time the troop had pitched camp, and had met with some amusing and thrilling adventures, as described in a previous volume, called "The Banner Boy Scouts on a Tour."

"On my part I wish it would turn out to be good old Lake Tokala, where my heart has often been centered as I think of the happy days we spent there."

It was, of course, Bobolink who gave utterance

to this sentiment. Perhaps there were others who really echoed his desire, for they had certainly had a glorious time of it when cruising in the motor boats so kindly loaned to them.

Paul held up his hand for silence, and immediately every voice became still. Discipline was enforced at these meetings, for the noisy boys and those inclined to play practical pranks had learned long ago they would have to smother their feelings at such times or be strongly repressed by the chair.

"Listen," said the leader, in his clear voice, "you kindly asked me to try to plan a trip for the holidays that would be of the greatest benefit to us as an organization of scouts. I seriously considered half a dozen plans, among them Rattlesnake Mountain, and Cedar Island in Lake Tokala. In fact, I was on the point of suggesting that we take the last mentioned trip when something came up that entirely changed my plan for the outing."

He stopped to see what effect his words were having. Evidently, he had aroused the curiosity of the assembled scouts to fever heat, for several voices immediately called out:

"Hear! hear! please go on, Paul! We're dying to know what the game is!"

Paul smiled, as he went on to say:

"I guess you have all been so deeply interested in what was going on to-night, that few of you noticed that we have a friend present who slipped into the room just as the roll call began. All of you must know the gentleman, so it's hardly necessary for me to introduce Mr. Thomas Garrity to you."

Of course, every one turned quickly on hearing this. A figure that had been seated in a dim corner of the assembly room arose, and Bobolink gasped with a delicious sense of pleasure when he recognized the man whom he and his fellow scouts had assisted that very afternoon.

"Please come forward, Mr. Garrity," said Paul, "and tell the boys what you suggested to me late this afternoon. I'm sure they'd appreciate it more coming directly from you than getting it second-hand."

While a hum of eager anticipation arose all around, Mr. Garrity made his way to the side of the patrol leader and president of the meeting.

"I have no doubt," he said, "that those of you who were not present to-day when our old ice-house fell and caught me in the ruins, have heard all about the accident, so I need not refer to the incident except to say that I shall never cease to be grateful to the scouts for the clever way in which they dug me out of the wreck."

"Hear! hear!" several excited scouts shouted.

"I happened to learn that you were contemplating a trip during the holidays, and when an idea slipped into my mind I lost no time in calling upon Paul Morrison, your efficient leader, in order to interest him in my plan."

"Hear! hear!"

"It happens that I own a forest cabin up in the wilderness where I often go to rest myself and get away from all excitement. It is in charge of a faithful woodsman by the name of Tolly Tip. You can reach it by skating a number of miles up a stream that empties into Lake Tokala. The hunting is said to be very good around there, and you will find excellent pickerel fishing through the ice in Lake Tokala. If you care to do me the favor of accepting my offer, the services of my man and the use of the cabin are at your disposal. Even then I shall feel that this is only a beginning of the deep interest I am taking in the scouts' organization; for I have had my eyes opened at last in a wonderful manner."

As Mr. Garrity sat down, rosy-red from the exertion of speaking to a party of boys, Paul immediately rapped for order, and put the question.

"All who are in favor of accepting this generous offer say yes!" and every boy joined in the vociferous shout that arose.

CHAPTER V

A STARTLING INTERRUPTION

"MR. GARRITY, your kind offer is accepted with thanks," announced Paul. "And as you suggested to me, several of us will take great pleasure in calling on you to-morrow to go into details and to get full directions from you."

"Then perhaps I may as well go home now, boys," said the old gentleman; "as my wrist is paining me considerably. I only want to add that this has been a red day in my calendar. The collapse of the old ice-house is going to prove one of those blessings that sometimes come to us in disguise. I only regret that two little girls were injured. As for myself, I am thoroughly pleased it happened."

"Before you leave us, sir," said Bobolink, boldly, "please let us show in some slight way how much we appreciate your kind offer. Boys, three cheers for Mr. Thomas Garrity, our latest convert, and already one of our best friends!"

Possibly Bobolink's method of expressing his

feelings might not ordinarily appeal to a man of Mr. Garrity's character, but just now the delighted old gentleman was in no mood for fault finding.

As the boyish cheers rang through the room there were actually tears in Mr. Garrity's eyes. Truly that had been a great day for him, and perhaps it might prove a joyous occasion to many of his poor tenants, some of whom had occasion to look upon him as a just, though severe, landlord, exacting his rent to the last penny.

After he had left the room the hum of voices became furious. One would have been inclined to suspect the presence of a great bee-hive in the near vicinity.

"Paul, you know all about this woods cabin he owns," said Tom Betts, "so suppose you enlighten the rest of us."

"One thing tickles me about the venture!" exclaimed Bobolink. "That is that we pass across Lake Tokala in getting there. I've been hankering to see that place in winter time for ever so long."

"Yes," added Tom, eagerly, "that's true. And what's to hinder some of us from using our iceboats part of the way?"

"Nothing at all," Paul assured him. "I went into that with Mr. Garrity, and came to the conclusion that it could be done. Of course, a whole

lot depends on how many of us can go on the trip."

"How many could sleep in his cabin do you think, Paul?" demanded Jack.

"Yes. For one, I'd hate to have to bunk out in the snow these cold nights," said Bluff, shaking his head seriously, for Bluff dearly liked the comforts of a cheery fire inside stout walls of logs, while the bitter wintry wind howled without, and the snow drifted badly.

"He told me it was unusually large," explained Paul. "In fact, it has two big rooms and could in a pinch accommodate ten fellows. Of course, every boy would be compelled to tote his blankets along with him, because Mr. Garrity never dreamed he would have an army occupy his log shanty."

"The more I think of it the better it sounds!" declared Jack.

"Then first of all we must try to find out just who can go," suggested Bobolink.

"What if there are too many to be accommodated either on the iceboats we own or in the cabin?" remarked Tom Betts, uneasily.

"Shucks! that ought to be easy," suggested another. "All we have to do is to pull straws, and see who the lucky ten are."

"Then let those who are *positive* they can go

step aside here," Paul ordered; and at this there was a shuffling of feet and considerable moving about.

"Remember, you must be sure you can go," warned Paul. "Afterwards we'll single out those who believe they can get permission, but feel some doubts. If there is room they will come in for next choice."

Several who had started forward held back at this. Those who took their stand as the leader requested consisted of Jack, Bobolink, Bluff, Tom Betts, Jud Elderkin, Sandy Griggs, Phil Towns and "Spider" Sexton.

"Counting myself in the list that makes nine for certain," Paul observed. It was noticed that Tom Betts as well as Bobolink looked exceedingly relieved on discovering that, after all, there need be no drawing of lots.

"Now let those who have strong hopes of being able to go stand up to be counted," continued Paul. "I'll keep a list of the names, and the first who comes to say he has received full permission will be the one to make up the full count of ten members, which is all the cabin can accommodate."

The Carberry twins, as well as several others, stood over in line to have their names taken down.

"If one of us can go, Paul," explained Wallace Carberry, "we'll fix it up between us which it

shall be. But I'm sorry to say our folks don't take to this idea of a winter camp very strongly."

"Same over at my house," complained Bob Tice. "Mother is afraid something terrible might happen to us in such a hard spell of winter. As if scouts couldn't take care of themselves anywhere, and under all conditions!"

There were many gloomy faces seen in the gathering, showing that other boys knew their parents did not look on the delightful scheme with favor. Some of them could not accompany the party on account of other plans which had been arranged by their parents.

"If the ice stays as fine as it is now," remarked Tom Betts, "we can spin down the river on our iceboats, and maybe make our way through that old canal to Lake Tokala as well. But how about the creek leading up to the cabin, Paul? Did you ask Mr. Garrity about it?"

"Yes, I asked him everything I could think of," came the ready reply. "I'm sorry to say it will be necessary to leave our iceboats somewhere on the lake, for the creek winds around in such a way, and is so narrow in places, that none of us could work the boats up there."

"But wouldn't it be dangerous to leave them on the lake so long?" asked Tom, anxiously. "I've put in some pretty hard licks on my new craft,

and I'd sure hate to have any one steal it from me."

"Yes," added Bobolink, quickly, "and we all know that Lawson crowd have been showing themselves as mean as dirt lately. We thought we had got rid of our enemies some time ago, and here this new lot of rivals seems bent on making life miserable for all scouts. They are a tough crowd, and pretend to look down on us as weaklings. Hank Lawson is now playing the part of the bully in Stanhope, you know."

"I even considered that," continued Paul, who seldom omitted anything when laying plans. "Mr. Garrity told me there was a man living on the shore of Lake Tokala, who would look after our iceboats for a consideration."

"Bully for that!" exclaimed Tom, apparently much relieved. "All the same I think it would be as well for us to try to keep our camping place a secret if it can be done. Let folks understand that we're going somewhere around Lake Tokala; and perhaps the Lawson crowd will miss us."

"That isn't a bad idea," Paul agreed, "and I'd like every one to remember it. Of course, we feel well able to look after ourselves, but that's no reason why we should openly invite Hank and his cronies to come and bother us. Are you all agreed to that part of the scheme?"

In turn every scout present answered in the affirmative. Those who could not possibly accompany the party took almost as much interest in the affair as those intending to go; and there would be heart burnings among the members of Stanhope Troop from now on.

"How about the grub question, Paul?" demanded Bobolink.

"Every fellow who is going will have to provide a certain amount of food to be carried along with his blanket, gun, clothes bag, and camera. All that can be arranged when we meet to-morrow afternoon. In the meantime, I'm going to appoint Bobolink and Jack as a committee of two to spend what money we can spare in purchasing certain groceries such as coffee, sugar, hams, potatoes, and other things to be listed later."

Bobolink grinned happily on hearing that.

"See how pleased it makes him," jeered Tom Betts. "When you put Bobolink on the committee that looks after the grub, Paul, you hit him close to where he lives. One thing sure, we'll have plenty to eat along with us, for Bobolink never underrates the eating capacity of himself or his chums."

"You can trust me for that," remarked the one referred to, "because I was really hungry once in my life, and I've never gotten over the terrible

feeling. Yes, there is going to be a full dinner pail in Camp Garrity, let me tell you!"

"Camp Garrity sounds good to me!" exclaimed Sandy Griggs.

"Let it go down in the annals of Stanhope Troop at that!" cried another scout.

"We could hardly call it by any other name, after the owner has been so good as to place it at our disposal," said Paul, himself well pleased at the idea.

Bobolink was about to say something more when, without warning, there came a sudden crash accompanied by the jingling of broken glass. One of the windows fell in as though some hard object had struck it. The startled scouts, looking up, saw the arm and face of a boy thrust part way through the aperture, showing that he must have slipped and broken the window while trying to spy upon the meeting.

CHAPTER VI

A GLOOMY PROSPECT FOR JUD

"It's Jud Mabley!" exclaimed one of the scouts, instantly recognizing the face of the unlucky youth who had fallen part way through the window.

Jud was a boy of bad habits. He had applied to the scouts for membership, but had not been admitted on account of his unsavory reputation. Smarting under this sting Jud had turned to Hank Lawson and his crowd for sympathy, and was known to be hand-in-glove with those young rowdies.

"He's been spying on us, that's what!" cried Bobolink, indignantly.

"And learning our plans, like as not!" added Tom Betts.

"He ought to be caught and ridden on a rail!" exclaimed a third member of the troop, filled with anger.

"I'd say duck him in the river after cutting a hole in the ice!" called out another boy, furiously.

"Huh! first ketch your rabbit before you start cookin' him!" laughed Jud in a jeering fashion, as he waved them a mocking adieu through the broken window, and then vanished from view.

"After him, fellows!" shouted the impetuous Bobolink, and there was a hasty rush for the door, the boys snatching up their hats as they ran.

Paul was with the rest, not that he cared particularly about catching the eavesdropper, but he wanted to be on hand in case the rest of the scouts overtook Jud; for Paul held the reputation of the troop dear, and would not have the scouts sully their honor by a mean act.

The boys poured out of the meeting-place in a stream. The bright moon showed them a running figure which they judged must of course be Jud; so away they sprang in hot pursuit.

Somehow, it struck them that Jud was not running as swiftly as might be expected, for he had often proved himself a speedy contestant on the cinder path. He seemed to wabble more or less, and looked back over his shoulder many times.

Bobolink suspected there might be some sort of trick connected with this action on the part of the other, for Jud was known to be a schemer.

"Jack, he may be drawing us into a trap of some sort, don't you think?" he managed to gasp as he ran at the side of the other.

Apparently Jack, too, had noticed the queer actions of the fugitive. He had seen a mother rabbit pretend to be lame when seeking to draw enemies away from the place where her young ones lay hidden; yes, and a partridge often did the same thing, as he well knew.

"I was noticing that, Bobolink," he told the other, "but it strikes me Jud must have been hurt somehow when he crashed through that window."

"You mean he feels more or less weak, do you?"

"Something like that," came the reply.

"Well, we're coming up on him like fun, anyway, no matter what the cause may be!" Bobolink declared, and then found it necessary to stop talking if he wanted to keep in the van with several of the swiftest runners among the scouts.

It was true that they were rapidly overtaking Jud, who ran in a strange zigzag fashion like one who was dizzy. He kept up until the leaders among his pursuers came alongside; then he stopped short, and, panting for breath, squared off, striking viciously at them.

Jack and two other scouts closed in on him, regardless of blows, and Jud was made a prisoner. He ceased struggling when he found it could avail him nothing, but glared at his captors as an Indian warrior might have done.

"Huh! think you're smart, don't you, overhaulin' me so easy," he told them disdainfully. "But if I hadn't been knocked dizzy when I fell you never would a got me. Now what're you meanin' to do about it? Ain't a feller got a right to walk the public streets of this here town without bein' grabbed by a pack of cowards in soldier suits, and treated rough-house way?"

"That doesn't go with us, Jud Mabley," said Bobolink, indignantly. "You were playing the spy on us, you know it, trying to listen to all we were saying."

"So as to tell that Lawson crowd, and get them to start some mean trick on us in the bargain," added Tom Betts.

"O-ho! ain't a feller a right to stop alongside of a church to strike a match for his pipe?" jeered the prisoner, defiantly. "How was I to know your crowd was inside there? The streets are free to any one, man, woman or boy, I take it."

"How about the broken window, Jud?" demanded Bobolink, triumphantly.

"Yes! did you smash that pane of glass when you threw your match away, Jud," asked another boy, with a laugh.

"He was caught in the act, fellows," asserted Frank Savage, "and the next question with us is what ought we to do to punish a sneak and a spy?"

"I said it before—ride him on a rail around town so people can see how scouts stand up for their own rights!" came a voice from the group of excited boys.

"Oh! that would be letting him off too easy," Tom Betts affirmed. "'Twould serve him just about right if we ducked him a few times in the river."

"All we need is an axe to cut a hole through the ice," another lad went on to say, showing that the suggestion rather caught his fancy as the appropriate thing to do—making the punishment fit the crime, as it were.

"Keep it goin'," sneered the defiant Jud, not showing any signs of quailing under this bombardment. "Try and think up a few more pleasant things to do to me. If you reckon you c'n make me show the white feather you've got another guess comin', I want you to know. I'm true grit, I am!"

"You may be singing out of the other side of your mouth, Jud Mabley, before we're through with you," threatened Curly Baxter.

"Mebbe now you might think to get a hemp rope and try hangin' me," laughed the prisoner in an offensive manner. "That's what they do to spies, you know, in the army. Yes, and I know of a beauty of a limb that stands straight out from

the body of the tree 'bout ten feet from the ground. Shall I tell you where it lies?"

This sort of defiant talk was causing more of the scouts to become angry. It seemed to them like adding insult to injury. Here this fellow had spied upon their meeting, possibly learned all about the plans they were forming for the mid-winter holidays, and then finally had the misfortune to fall and smash one of the window panes, which would, of course, have to be made good by the scouts, as they were under heavy obligations to the trustees of the church for favors received.

"A mean fellow like you, Jud Mabley," asserted Joe Clausin, "deserves the worst sort of punishment that could be managed. Why, it would about serve you right if you got a lovely coat of tar and feathers to-night."

Jud seemed to shrink a little at hearing that.

"You wouldn't dare try such a game as that," he told them, with a faint note of fear in his voice. "Every one of you'd have to pay for it before the law. Some things might pass, but that's goin' it too strong. My dad'd have you locked up in the town cooler if I came home lookin' like a bird, sure he would."

Jud's father was something of a local power in politics, so that the boy's boast was not without more or less force. Some of the scouts may have

considered this; at any rate, one of them now broke out with:

"A ducking ought to be a good enough punishment for this chap, I should say; so, fellows, let's start in to give it to him."

"I know where I can lay hands on an axe all right, to chop a hole through the ice," asserted Bobolink, eagerly.

"Then we appoint you a committee of one to supply the necessary tools for the joyous occasion," Red Collins cried out, gleefully falling in with the scheme.

"Hold on, boys, don't you think it would be enough if Jud made an apology to us, and promised not to breathe a word of what he chanced to hear?"

It was Horace Poole who said this, for he often proved to be the possessor of a tender heart and a forgiving spirit. His mild proposition was laughed down on the spot.

"Much he'd care what he promised us, if only we let him go scot free," jeered one scout. "I've known him to give his solemn word before now, and break it when he felt like it. I wouldn't trust him out of my sight. Promises count for nothing with one of Jud Mabley's stamp."

"How about that, Jud?" demanded another boy. "Would you agree to keep your lips but-

toned up, and not tell a word of what you have heard?"

"I ain't promisin' nothin', I want you to know," replied the prisoner, boldly; "so go on with your funny business. You won't ketch me squealing worth a cent. Honest to goodness now I half b'lieve it's all a big bluff. Let's see you do your worst."

"Drag him along to the river bank, fellows, and I'll join you there with the axe," roared Bobolink, now fully aroused by the obstinate manner of the captive.

"Wait a bit, fellows."

It was Jack Stormways who said this, and even the impetuous Bobolink came to a halt.

"Go on Jack. What's your plan?" demanded one of the group.

"I was only going to remind you that in the absence of Mr. Gordon, Paul is acting as scoutmaster, and before you do anything that may reflect upon the good name of Stanhope Troop you'd better listen to what he's got to say on the subject."

CHAPTER VII

PAUL TAKES A CHANCE

THESE sensible words spoken by Jack Stormways had an immediate effect upon the angry scouts, some of whom realized that they had been taking matters too much in their own hands. Paul had remained silent all this while, waiting to see just how far the hotheads would go.

"First of all," he went on to say in that calm tone which always carried conviction with it, "let's go back to the meeting-room, and take Jud along. I have a reason for wanting you to do that, which you shall hear right away."

No one offered an objection, although doubtless it was understood that Paul did not like such radical measures as ducking the spy who had fallen into their hands. They were by this time fully accustomed to obeying orders given by a superior officer, which is one of the best things learned by scouts.

Jud, for some reason, did not attempt to hold back when urged to accompany them, though for

that matter it would have availed him nothing to have struggled and strained, for at least four sturdy scouts had their grip on his person.

In this manner they retraced their steps. Fortunately the last boy out had been careful enough to close the door after making his hurried exit, so that they found the room still warm and comfortable.

They crowded inside, and a number of them frowned as they glanced toward the broken window, through which a draught was blowing. They hoped Paul would not be too easy with the rascal who had been responsible for that smash.

"First of all," the scout-master began as they crowded around the spot where he and Jud stood, the latter staring defiantly at the frowning scouts, "I want to remark that it needn't bother us very much even if Jud tells all he may have heard us saying. We shall always be at least two to one, and can take care of ourselves if attacked. Those fellows understand that, I guess."

"We've proved it to them in the past times without number, for a fact," observed Jack, diplomatically.

"If they care to spend a week in the snow woods, let them try it," continued the other. "Good luck to them, say I; and here's hoping they may learn some lessons there that will make them turn over

a new leaf. The forest is plenty big enough for all who want to breathe the fresh air and have a good time. But there's another thing I had in mind when I asked you to bring Jud back here. Some of you may have noticed that he lets his arm hang down in a queer way. Look closer at his hand and you'll discover the reason."

Almost immediately several of the scouts cried out.

"Why, there's blood dripping from his fingers, as sure as anything!"

"He must have cut his arm pretty bad when he fell through that window!"

"Whew! I'd hate to have that slash. See how the broken glass cut his coat sleeve—just as if you'd taken a sharp knife and gashed it!"

"Take off your coat, Jud, please!" said Paul.

Had Paul used a less kindly voice or omitted that last word in his request, the obstinate and defiant Jud might have flatly declined to oblige him. As it was he looked keenly at Paul, then grinned, and with something of an effort started to doff his coat, Jack assisting him in the effort.

Then the boys saw that his shirt sleeve was stained red. Several of the weaker scouts uttered low exclamations of concern, not being accustomed to such sights; but the stouter hearted veterans had seen too many cuts to wince now.

Paul gently but firmly rolled the shirt sleeve up until the gash made by the broken glass was revealed. It was a bad cut, and still bled quite freely. No wonder Jud had run in such an unwonted fashion. No person wounded as badly as that could be expected to run with his customary zeal, for the shock and the loss of blood was sure to make him feel weak.

Jud stared at his injury now with what was almost an expression of pride. When he saw some of the scouts shrink back his lip curled with disdain.

"Get a tin basin and fill it with warm water back in the other room, Jack!" said Paul, steadily.

"What're you goin' to do to me, Paul?" demanded Jud, curiously, for he could not bring himself to believe that any one who was his enemy would stretch out a hand toward him save in anger and violence.

"Oh! I'm only going to wash that cut so as to take out any foreign matter that might poison you if left there, and then bind it up the best way possible," remarked the young scout-master.

There was some low whispering among the boys. Much as they marveled at such a way of returning evil with good they could not take exception to Paul's action. Every one of them knew deep down in his inmost heart that scout law

always insisted on treating a fallen enemy with consideration, and even forgiving him many times if he professed sorrow for his evil ways.

Jack came back presently. He not only bore the basin of warm water but a towel as well. Jud watched operations curiously. He was seeing what was a strange thing according to his ideas. He could not quite bring himself to believe that there was not some cruel hoax hidden in this act of apparent friendliness, and that accounted for the way he kept his teeth tightly closed. He did not wish to be taken unawares and forced to cry out.

Paul washed gently the ugly, jagged cut. Then, taking out a little zinc box containing some soothing and healing salve, which he always carried with him, he used fully half of it upon the wound.

Afterwards he produced a small inch wide roll of surgical linen, and began winding the tape methodically around the injured arm of Jud Mabley. Jack amused himself by watching the play of emotions upon the hard face of Jud. Evidently, he was beginning to comprehend the meaning of Paul's actions, though he could not understand why any one should act so.

When the last of the tape had been used and fastened with a small safety pin, Paul drew down the shirt sleeve, buttoned it, and then helped Jud on with his coat.

"Now you can go free when you take a notion, Jud," he told the other.

"Huh! then you ain't meanin' to gimme that duckin' after all?" remarked the other, with a sneering look of triumph at Bobolink.

"You have to thank Paul for getting you off," asserted one scout, warmly. "Had it been left to the rest of us you'd have been in soak long before this."

"For my part," said Paul, "I feel that so far as punishment goes Jud has got all that is coming to him, for that arm will give him a lot of trouble before it fully heals. I hope every time it pains him he'll remember that scouts as a rule are taught to heap coals of fire on the heads of their enemies when the chance comes, by showing them a favor."

"But, Paul, you're forgetting something," urged Tom Betts.

"That's a fact, how about the broken window, Paul?" cried Joe Clausin, with more or less indignation. For while it might be very well to forgive Jud his spying tricks some one would have to pay for a new pane of glass in the basement window, and it was hard luck if the burden fell on the innocent parties, while the guilty one escaped scot free.

It was noticed that Jud shut his lips tight together as though making up his mind on the spot

to decline absolutely to pay a cent for what had been a sheer accident, and which had already cost him a severe wound.

"I haven't forgotten that, fellows," said Paul, quietly. "Of course it's only fair Jud should pay the dollar it will cost to have a new pane put in there to-morrow. I shall order Mr. Nickerson to attend to it myself. And I shall also insist on paying the bill out of my own pocket, unless Jud here thinks it right and square to send me the money some time to-morrow. That's all I've got to say, Jud. There's the door, and no one will put out a hand to stop you. I hope you won't have serious trouble with that arm of yours."

Jud stared dumbly at the speaker as though almost stunned. Perhaps he might have said something under the spur of such strange emotions as were chasing through his brain, but just then Bobolink chanced to sneer. The sound acted on Jud like magic, for he drew himself up, turned to look boldly into the face of each and every boy present, then thrust his right hand into his buttoned coat and with head thrown back walked out of the room, noisily closing the door after him.

Several of the scouts shook their heads.

"Pretty fine game you played with him, Paul," remarked George Hurst, "but it strikes me it was like throwing pearls before swine. Jud has a hide

as thick as a rhinoceros and nothing can pierce it. Kind words are thrown away with fellows of his stripe, I'm afraid. A kick and a punch are all they can understand."

"Yes," added Red Collins, "when you try the soft pedal on them they think you're only afraid. I'm half sorry now you didn't let us carry out that ducking scheme. Jud deserved it right well, for a fact."

"It would have been cruel to drop him into ice water with such a wound freshly made," remarked Jack. "Wait and see whether Paul's plan was worth the candle."

"Mark my words," commented Tom Betts, "we'll have lots of trouble with him yet."

"Shucks! who cares?" laughed Bobolink, "it's all in the game, you know. There's Paul getting ready to go home, so let's forget it till we meet to-morrow."

CHAPTER VIII

BOBOLINK AND THE STOREKEEPER

ACCORDING to their agreement, Jack and Bobolink met on a certain corner on the following morning. Their purpose was to purchase the staple articles of food that half a score of hungry lads would require to see them through a couple of weeks' stay in the snow forest.

"It's a lucky thing, too," Bobolink remarked, after the other had displayed the necessary funds taken from his pocket, "that our treasury happens to be fairly able to stand the strain just now."

"Oh, well! except for that we'd have had to take up subscriptions," laughed Jack. "I know several people who would willingly help us out. The scouts of Stanhope have made good in the past, and a host of good friends are ready to back them."

"Yes, and for that matter I guess Mr. Thomas Garrity would have been only too glad to put his hand deep down in his pocket," suggested Bobolink.

"He's an old widower, and with plenty of ready cash, too," commented the other boy. "But, after all, it's much better for us to stand our own expense as long as we can."

"Have you got the list that Paul promised to make out with you, Jack? I'd like to take a squint at it, if you don't mind. There may be a few things we could add to it."

As Bobolink was looked on as something of an authority in this line, Jack hastened to produce the list, so they could run it over and exchange suggestions.

"Where shall we start in to buy the stuff?" asked Bobolink, presently.

"Oh! I don't know that it matters very much," replied his companion. "Mr. Briggs has had some pretty fine hams in lately I heard at the house this morning, and if he treats us half-way decent we might do all our trading with him."

"I never took much stock in old Levi Briggs," said Bobolink. "He hates boys for all that's out. I guess some of them do nag him more or less. I saw that Lawson crowd giving him a peck of trouble a week ago. He threatened to call the police if they didn't go away."

"Well, we happen to be close to the Briggs' store," observed Jack, "so we might as well drop in and see how he acts toward us."

"Huh! speaking of the Lawson bunch, there they are right now!" exclaimed Bobolink.

Loud jeering shouts close by told that Hank and his cronies were engaged in their favorite practice of having "fun." This generally partook of the nature of the old fable concerning boys who were stoning frogs, which was "great fun for the boys, but death to the frogs."

"It's a couple of ragged hoboes they're nagging now," burst out Bobolink.

"The pair just came out of Briggs' store," added Jack, "where I expect they met a cold reception if they hoped to coax a bite to eat from the old man."

"Still, they couldn't have done anything to Hank and his crowd, so why should they be pushed off the walk in that way?" Bobolink went on to say.

As a rule the boy had no use for tramps. He looked on the vagrants as a nuisance and a menace to the community. At the same time, no self-respecting scout would think of casting the first stone at a wandering hobo, though, if attacked, he would always defend himself, and strike hard.

"The tramps don't like the idea of engaging in a fight with a pack of tough boys right here in town," remarked Jack, "because they know the police would grab them first, no matter if they were only defending themselves. That's why they

don't hit back, but only dodge the stones the boys are flinging."

"Oh! that's a mean sort of game!" cried Bobolink, as he saw the two tramps start to run wildly away. "There! that shorter chap was hit in the head with one of the rocks thrown after them. I bet you it raised a fine lump. What a lot of cowards those Lawsons are, to be sure."

"Well, the row is all over now," observed Jack. "And as the tramps have disappeared around the corner we don't want to break into the game, so come along to the store, and let's see what we can do there."

Bobolink continued to shake his head pugnaciously as he walked along the pavement. Hank and his followers were laughing at a great rate as they exchanged humorous remarks concerning the recent "fight" which had been all one-sided.

"Believe me!" muttered Bobolink, "if a couple more scouts had been along just now I'd have taken a savage delight in pitching in and giving that crowd the licking they deserved. Course a tramp isn't worth much, but then he's *human,* and I hate to see anybody bullied."

"It wasn't Hank's business to chase the hoboes out of town," said Jack. "We have the police force to manage such things. Fact is, I reckon Hank's bunch has done more to hurt the good

name of Stanhope than all the hoboes we ever had come around here."

"If I had my way, Jack, there'd be a public woodpile, and every tramp caught coming to town would have to work his passage. I bet there'd be a sign on every cross-roads warning the brotherhood to beware of Stanhope as they might of the smallpox. But here's Briggs' store."

As they entered the place they could see that the proprietor was alone, his clerk being off on the delivery wagon.

"Whew! he certainly looks pretty huffy this morning," muttered the observing Bobolink. "Those tramps must have bothered him more or less before he could get them to move on."

"It might be he had some trouble with Hank before we came up," Jack suggested; but further talk was prevented by the coming up of the storekeeper.

Mr. Briggs was a small man with white hair, and keen, rat-like eyes. He possessed good business abilities, and had managed to accumulate a small fortune in the many years he purveyed to the people of Stanhope.

Latterly, however, the little, old man had been growing very nervous and irritable, perhaps with the coming of age and its infirmities. He detested boys, and since that feeling soon becomes mutual

there was open war between Mr. Briggs and many of the juveniles of Stanhope.

Suspicious by nature, he always watched when boys came into his store as though he weighed them all in the same balance with Hank Lawson, and considered that none of Stanhope's rising generation could be trusted out of sight.

Long ago he had taken to covering every apple and sugar barrel with wire screens to prevent pilfering. Neither Jack nor Bobolink had ever had hot words with the storekeeper, but for all that they felt that his manner was openly aggressive at the time they entered the door.

"If you want to buy anything, boys," said Mr. Briggs curtly, "I'll wait on you; but if you've only come in here to stand around my store and get warm I'll have to ask you to move on. My time is too valuable to waste just now."

Jack laughed on hearing that.

"Oh! we mean business this morning, Mr. Briggs," he remarked pleasantly, while Bobolink scowled, and muttered something under his breath. "The fact is a party of us scouts are planning to spend a couple of weeks up in the snow woods," continued Jack. "We have a list here of some things we want to take along, and will pay cash for them. We want them delivered to-day at our meeting room under the church."

"Let Mr. Briggs have the list, Jack," suggested Bobolink. "He can mark the prices he'll let us have the articles for. Of course, sir, we mean to buy where we can get the best terms for cash."

Bobolink knew the grasping nature of the old storekeeper, and perhaps this was intended for a little trap to trip him up. Mr. Briggs glanced over the list and promptly did some figuring, after which he handed the paper back.

"Seems to me your prices are pretty steep, sir!" remarked Jack.

"I should say they were," added Bobolink, with a gleam in his eyes. "Why, you are two cents a pound on hams above the other stores. Yes, and even on coffee and rice you are asking more than we can get the same article for somewhere else."

"Those are my regular prices," said the old man, shortly. "If they are not satisfactory to you, of course, you are at liberty to trade elsewhere. In fact, I do not believe you meant to buy these goods of me, but have only come in to annoy me as those other good-for-nothing boys always do."

"Indeed, you are mistaken, Mr. Briggs," expostulated Jack, who did not like to be falsely accused when innocent. "We are starting out to see where we can get our provisions at the most reasonable rates. Some of the storekeepers are only too glad to give the scouts a reduction."

"Well, you'll get nothing of the sort here, let me tell you," snapped the unreasonable old man. "I can't afford to do business at cost just to please a lot of harum-scarum boys, who want to spend days loafing in the woods when they ought to be earning an honest penny at work."

"Come on, Jack, let's get out of here before I say something I'll be sorry for," remarked Bobolink, who was fiery red with suppressed anger.

"There's the door, and your room will be better appreciated than your company," Mr. Briggs told them. "And as for your trade, take it where you please. Your people have left me for other stores long ago, so why should I care?"

"Oh! that's where the shoe pinches, is it?" chuckled Bobolink; and after that he and Jack left the place, to do their shopping in more congenial quarters, while Mr. Briggs stood on his doorsteps and glared angrily after them.

CHAPTER IX

"FIRE!"

"SATURDAY, eleven-thirty P.M., the night before Christmas, and all's well!"

It was Frank Savage who made this remark, as with eight other scouts he trudged along, after having left the house of the scout-master, Paul Morrison. Frank had been the lucky one to be counted among those who were going on the mid-winter tour, his parents having been coaxed into giving their consent.

"And on Monday morning we make the start, wind and weather permitting," observed Bobolink, with an eagerness he did not attempt to conceal.

"So far as we know everything is in complete readiness," said Bluff Shipley.

"Five iceboats are tugging at their halters, anxious to be off," laughed Jack. "And there'll be a lot of restless sleepers in certain Stanhope homes I happen to know."

"Huh! there always are just before Christmas," chuckled Tom Betts. "But this year we have a

double reason for lying awake and counting the dragging minutes. Course you committee of two looked after the grub supplies as you were directed?"

"We certainly did!" affirmed Bobolink, "and came near getting into a row with old Briggs at his store. He wanted to ask us top-notch prices for everything, and when we kicked he acted so ugly we packed out."

"Just like the old curmudgeon," declared Phil Towns. "The last time I was in his place he kept following me around as if he thought I meant to steal him out of house and home. I just up and told my folks I never wanted to trade with Mr. Briggs again, and so they changed to the other store."

"Oh, well, he's getting old and peevish," said Jack. "You see he lives a lonely life, and has a narrow vision. Besides, some boys have given him a lot of trouble, and he doesn't know the difference between decent fellows and scamps. We'd better let him alone, and talk of something else."

"I suppose all of you notice that it's grown cloudy late to-day," suggested Spider Sexton.

"Oh! I hope that doesn't mean a heavy snowfall before we get started," exclaimed Bluff. "If a foot of snow comes down on us, good-bye to our using the iceboats as we've been planning."

"The weather reports at the post office say fair and cold ahead for this section," announced Jack Stormways, at which there arose many faint cheers.

"Good boy, Jack!" cried Bobolink, patting the other's back. "It was just like the thoughtful fellow you are to go down and read the prospect the weather sharps in Washington hold out for us."

"You must thank Paul for that, then," admitted the other, "for he told me about it. I rather expect Paul had the laugh on the rest of us to-night, boys."

"Now you're referring to that Jud Mabley business, Jack," said Phil Towne.

"Well, when Paul let him off so easy every one of us believed he was wrong, and that the chances were ten to one Paul would have to fork over the dollar to pay for having that window pane put in," continued Jack. "But you heard what happened?"

"Yes, seems that the age of miracles hasn't passed yet," admitted Bobolink. "I thought I was dreaming when Paul told me that Jud's little brother came this morning with an envelope addressed to him, and handed it in without a word."

"And when Paul opened it," continued Jack, taking up the story in his turn, "he found a nice, new dollar bill enclosed, with a scrap of paper on

which Jud had scrawled these words: 'Never would have paid only I couldn't let *you* stand for my accident, and after you treated me so white, too. But this wipes it all out, remember. I'm no crawler!' "

"It tickled Paul a whole lot, let me remark," Jud Elderkin explained. "I do half believe he thinks he can see a rift in the cloud, and that some of these days hopes to get a chance to drag Jud Mabley out of that ugly crowd."

"It would be just like Paul to lay plans that way," acknowledged Jack. "I know him like a book, and believe me, he gets more pleasure out of making his enemies feel cheap than the rest of us would if we gave them a good licking."

"Paul's a sure-enough trump!" admitted Bluff. "Do you know what he said when he was showing that scrawl to us fellows? I was close enough to get part of it, and I'm dead sure the words 'entering wedge' formed the backbone of his remark."

"Do we go, snow or sunshine, then?" asked Bluff, as they came to a halt on a corner where several of the boys had to leave the rest, as their homes lay in different directions.

"That's for Paul to decide," Jack told him. "But we know our leader well enough to feel sure it's got to be a fierce storm to make him call a trip off, once all preparations have been made."

"Oh! don't borrow trouble," sang out Bobolink. "Everything is lovely, and the goose hangs high. Just keep on remembering that to-morrow will be Christmas, and all of us expect to find something in our stockings, so to speak."

"There's one word of warning I ought to speak before we separate," said Jack, pretending to look solemn as they stood under a corner street lamp.

"Now the chances are you're referring to that Lawson crowd again, Jack," suggested Bobolink.

"This time it comes nearer home than the Lawsons," said Jack, seriously.

"Then for goodness sake tell us what you have on your mind," urged Tom Betts, impulsively.

"As the second in command in our patrol," Jack went on gravely, "since Paul failed to say anything about it, I feel it my solemn duty to warn several of our number to be extra careful how they gorge at Christmas dinner to-morrow. Too much turkey and plum pudding have stretched out many a brave scout before now. If there are several vacancies in our ranks Monday morning we'll know what to lay it all to. I beg of you to abstain, if you want to feel fresh and hearty at the start."

A general laugh greeted the warning, and every one looked particularly at Bobolink, much to his confusion.

"If the shoe fits, put it on, everybody," Bobo-

link remarked stoutly. "As for me, I'd already made up my mind to be satisfied with one helping all around. And when a Link says a thing he always keeps his word."

"Well," remarked Phil Towns, wickedly, "we hope that this time we won't have to refer to our chum as the 'Missing Link,' that's all."

That caused another mild eruption of boyish laughter, and before Bobolink could make a caustic reply a sudden loud metallic clang startled them.

"Listen, it's the fire alarm!" exclaimed Tom Betts.

Again the sound came with startling distinctness.

Boylike, Jack and his friends forgot everything else just then in this new excitement. Stanhope had a volunteer fire department, like most small towns in that section of the country. Stanhope was proud of its fire laddies, who had, on numerous previous occasions, proved their skill at fighting the flames. Already loud shouts could be heard in various quarters, as men threw up windows and called to neighbors.

"Where can it be, do you think?" demanded Jud Elderkin, as the group of lads stood ready for flight, only waiting to catch some definite clue, so that they might not start on a wild-goose chase.

"Seems to me I c'n see a flickering light over yonder!" cried Spider Sexton, as he pointed toward the heart of the town.

"You're right, Spider!" echoed Tom Betts. "That's where the fire lies. See how it keeps on getting brighter right along, showing that the blaze has got a firm grip. Hey! wait for me, can't you, fellows?"

"Wait your granny!" shouted Bobolink over his shoulder as he fled wildly down the street. "Run for all your worth, old ice-wagon. Whoop! here we come, Stanhope's fire-fighters!"

There was excitement on every side of them now. Doors opened to emit men hastily donning rubber coats and firemen's hats. Women and children had commenced to scream at each other across dividing fences. Dogs began to join in the general confusion by barking madly. And above all the increasing clamor, the brazen notes of the fire bell continued to clang furiously.

The nine scouts, being already on the street at the time the alarm was turned in, had a big advantage over others, since they were dressed in the beginning. As they ran on they were joined by a number of men and women who had chanced to be up at this late hour, possibly decorating Christmas trees for the benefit of the children on the coming morning.

CHAPTER X

THE ACCUSATION

"CAN you guess where it is, Jack?" gasped Frank Savage as he strove to keep alongside the other while running to the fire.

Just then they reached a corner, and as they dashed around it they came in plain sight of the conflagration.

"It's Briggs' store, fellows!" shouted Frank over his shoulder.

Ten seconds later all of them were on the spot where already a little cluster of men and boys were gathered, some of them near neighbors, others having come up ahead of the scouts.

"Hey! what's this I see?" Bobolink said to his chum nearest him; "two of the Lawson crowd here, dodging about and grinning as if they thought it a picnic?"

"Look at old Briggs, will you?" cried Sandy Griggs. "He's dancing around like a chicken after you've chopped its head off."

"Did you ever see anybody so excited?" de-

manded Bobolink. "Hold on! what's that he's saying now about somebody setting his store afire on purpose?"

"It's a black scheme to get me out of competition!" the little, old storekeeper was crying as he wrung his hands wildly. "Somebody must have known that my insurance ran out three weeks ago, and for once I neglected to renew it! I shall be ruined if it all goes! Why don't some of you try to save my property?"

"Boys, it seems that it's up to us to get busy and do something!" exclaimed Frank Savage, immediately.

"It comes hard to work for the old skinflint," declared Bobolink, "but I s'pose we're bound to forget everything but that some one's stuff is in danger, and that we belong to the scouts!"

"Come on then, everybody, and let's sling things around!" cried Jud Elderkin.

No matter how the fire started it was burning fiercely, and promised to give the volunteer firemen a good fight when they arrived, as they were likely to do at any moment now. Indeed, loud cries not far away, accompanied by the rush of many heavily booted feet and the trampling of horses' hoofs announced that the engine, hook and ladder, and chemical companies were close at hand.

The nine scouts dashed straight at the store front. The door stood conveniently open, though they could only hazard a guess as to how it came so—possibly when brought to the spot with the first alarm of fire the owner had used his key to gain an entrance.

Into the store tumbled the boys. The interior was already pretty well filled with an acrid smoke that made their eyes run; but through it they could manage to see the barrels and boxes so well remembered.

These some of the scouts started to get out as best they could. Jack, realizing that in all probability the rolls of cloth and silks on the shelves would suffer worst from the water soon to be applied, led several of his companions to that quarter.

They were as busy as the proverbial beaver, rushing goods outdoors where they could be taken in hand by others, and placed in temporary security. A couple of the local police force had by this time reached the scene, and they could be depended on to guard Mr. Briggs' property as it was gathered in the street.

The owner of the store seemed half beside himself, rushing this way and that, and saying all manner of bitter things. Even at that moment, when the boys of Stanhope were making such

heroic efforts to save his property, he seemed to entertain suspicions regarding them, for he often called out vague threats as to what would happen if they dared take anything belonging to him.

Now came the volunteer fire-fighters, with loud hurrahs. There seemed no need of the ladders, but the fire engine was quickly taken to the nearest cistern and the suction pipe lowered. When that reservoir was emptied others in the near vicinity would be tapped, and if the water supply held out the fire could possibly be gotten under control.

That was likely to be the last time the citizens of Stanhope would have to cope with a fire in their midst, armed with such old-fashioned weapons. A new waterworks system was being installed, and in the course of a couple of weeks Stanhope hoped to be supplied with an abundance of clear spring water through the network of pipes laid under the town streets during the preceding summer and fall.

Mr. Forbes, the efficient foreman of the fire company, was the right sort of man for the work. He was one of the town blacksmiths, a fine citizen, and highly respected by every one.

As his heavy voice roared out orders the men under him trailed the hose out, the engine began to work furiously, sending out black smoke from

its funnel, and the men who handled the chemical engine brought it into play.

Even in that time, when dozens of things pressed hard upon the foreman demanding his attention, he found occasion to speak words of encouragement to the busy scouts as they trooped back and forth, carrying all sorts of bulky articles out of the reach of the flames.

"Good boys, every one of you!" he called out to them as Jack and Bobolink came staggering along with their arms filled with bolts of Mr. Briggs' most cherished silks, "you've got the making of prize firemen in you I can see. Don't overdo it, though, lads; and make way for the men with the hose!"

By the time the first stream of water was turned on the fire the flames were leaping upward, and the entire back part of the store seemed to be doomed. Being a frame building and very old it had been like matchwood in the path of the flames.

"Now watch how they slam things down on the old fire!" exclaimed Bobolink as he stood aside unable to enter the store again since the firemen had taken possession of the premises. "The water will do more damage than the fire ever had a chance to accomplish."

"Wow! see them smash those windows in, will you!" shouted Jud Elderkin, as a man with a fire

axe made a fresh opening in one side of the store in order to put a second line of hose to work.

Everybody was calling out, and what with the crackling of the hungry flames, the neighing of the horses that had drawn the fire-engine to the spot, the whooping of gangs of delighted boys, and a lot of other miscellaneous sounds, Bedlam seemed to have broken loose in Stanhope on this night before Christmas.

"They've got the bulge on it already, seems like," announced Tom Betts.

"But even that doesn't seem to give Mr. Briggs much satisfaction," remarked Frank. "There he is running back and forth between the store and the stack of goods we piled up in the street."

"I reckon he is afraid the police will steal some of the silks," chuckled Bobolink.

"The fire is going down right fast now," Tom Betts affirmed. "What's left of the Briggs' store may be saved. But Mr. Briggs is bound to lose a heap, and it cuts the old man to the bone to let a dollar slip away from him."

"To think of such a smart business man allowing his insurance policy to lapse, and to lie unrenewed for a whole month!" exclaimed Bluff.

"Got tired paying premiums for so many years and never having a fire," explained Jack.

As the crowd stood there the last of the blaze

yielded to the efforts of the firemen. Most of the building was saved, though the business was bound to be crippled for some time, and Mr. Briggs' loss would run into the hundreds, perhaps thousands, for all any one knew.

"Listen to him scolding the foreman of the fire company, will you?" demanded Bobolink. "He seems to think a whole hour elapsed after the alarm before the boys got here. Why, it was the quickest run on record, I should say."

"Here they come this way," observed Tom Betts, "and the foreman is trying to convince Mr. Briggs he is mistaken. He knows how excited Mr. Briggs is, and excuses anything he may say. Mr. Forbes is a big man in more ways than bulk."

"Perhaps Mr. Briggs may want to scold us for not getting more stuff out before the water was turned on," chuckled Bobolink.

"Don't answer him back if he does," Jack warned them, "because we know he's nearly out of his mind just now."

Still, even practical Jack was shocked when the old storekeeper, coming face to face with the group of scouts, suddenly pointed a trembling finger at Bobolink and exclaimed in a vindictive voice:

"I knew this fire was started in revenge, and there's the boy who did it!"

CHAPTER XI

FRIENDS OF THE SCOUTS

EVERYBODY came crowding around at hearing Mr. Briggs make such a startling accusation. Bobolink seemed to have had his very breath taken away, for all he could do was to stare helplessly at the angry, little, old storekeeper. The magnitude of the crime with which he was accused stunned him.

Some of the other scouts managed to find their tongues readily enough. Flushed with indignation they proceeded to express their feelings as boys might be expected to do under strong resentment.

"Well, I like that, now!" exclaimed Tom Betts. "When Bobolink here has been working like a beaver to save Mr. Briggs' stuff from the maw of the flames."

"That was only meant to be a blind to hide the truth!" cried Mr. Briggs. "After he set the fire he must have become frightened at what he had done, and tried to cover up his tracks. Oh! I

know what boys are capable of; but I'll have the law on this miscreant who tried to get revenge on me this way, see if I don't."

"Shame on you, Mr. Briggs," said a stout woman close by. "And the boy nearly killing himself to carry out big loads of your silks! It's many dollars he saved you, and little credit he'll ever get."

"Don't you know Bobolink has the best kind of alibi, Mr. Briggs?" said Frank. "He was over at Doctor Morrison's house along with the rest of us until just before the alarm sounded. We were on our way home when the bell struck first."

"The doctor himself will tell you that, if you ask him," added Jack, indignant now because of what had passed after all they had done for the old man. "Mr. Forbes, I wish you would warn him not to make such a reckless accusation again, because he might have to prove it in court. Boys have rights as well as storekeepers, he must know."

"It's just as you say, Jack, my lad," asserted the big foreman of the truck company, warmly. "I stood all your abuse, Mr. Briggs, when it was directed against myself, but I advise you to go slow about charging any of these young chaps with setting fire to your store. All of us have seen how they worked trying to save your property,

sir. It is a poor return you are making for their efforts."

Others shared this opinion, and realizing that he did not have a single friend in the crowd, Mr. Briggs had the good sense to keep his further suspicions to himself. But that he was still far from convinced of Bobolink's innocence could be seen by the malevolent glances he shot toward the boy from time to time, while the scouts stood and watched the final work of the fire-fighters.

The last spark had been extinguished, and all danger was past. Many of the townspeople began to leave for their comfortable homes, because it was bitterly cold at that hour of the night, with a coating of snow on the ground.

Paul had come up during the excitement, but somehow had failed to join the rest of the scouts until later on. The other scouts thought that doubtless he had found something to claim his attention elsewhere; but he came up to them about the time they were thinking of taking their departure.

His indignation was strong when he heard what a foolish accusation the almost distracted storekeeper had made against Bobolink. Still Paul was a sensible lad, and he realized that Mr. Briggs could hardly be held responsible for what he said at such a time.

"Better forget all about it, Bobolink," he told the other, who was still fretting under the unmerited charge. "Perhaps when he cools off and realizes what a serious thing he has said, Mr. Briggs will publicly take his words back, and will thank you fellows in the bargain."

"But how came it you were so slow in getting to the fire, Paul?" asked Tom Betts; for, as a rule, the patrol leader could be counted on to arrive with the first.

Paul laughed at that.

"I knew you'd be wondering," he said, and then went on to explain. "For once I was caught in a trap, and, much as I wanted to get out and run, I just had to hold my horses for a spell. You see, after you had gone father asked me to hold something for him while he was attending to it, and I couldn't very well drop it until he was through."

"Whew! it sure must have been something pretty important to keep Paul Morrison from running to a fire," chuckled Frank.

"It was important," came the ready reply. "In fact, it was a man's broken arm I was holding. Ben Holliday was brought in just after you boys left. He had fallen in some way and sustained a compound fracture of his left arm. Neither of the men who were along with him could be counted on to assist, so father called on me to lend a hand.

And that's why I was late at the Briggs' store fire."

"You missed a great sight, Paul, let me tell you," affirmed Bluff.

"Yes, and you missed hearing a friend of yours called a fire-bug, too, in the bargain," grunted Bobolink. "And after I'd sweated and toiled like fun to drag a lot of his old junk out of reach of fire and flood! That's what makes me sore. Now, if I'd just stood around and laughed, like a lot of the fellows did, it wouldn't have been so bad."

"Listen!" said Jud Elderkin, lowering his voice, "when old Briggs got the notion that some bad boy set his store on fire in a spirit of revenge, maybe he wasn't so far wrong after all."

"Say, what are you hinting at now, Jud?" gasped Bobolink, suspiciously. "You know as well as anything I was along with the crowd every minute of the time."

"Sure I do, Bobolink," asserted the other, blandly. "I wasn't referring to you at all when I said that. There are others in the swim. You're not the only pebble on the beach, you understand."

"Now I get you, Jud!" Tom Betts exclaimed. "And let me say, I've been having little suspicions of my own leading in that same direction."

"We found Hank, Jud Mabley and Sim Jeffreys on the spot when we got here, you all remember, and they seemed tickled to death because it was the

Briggs' place that was on fire," continued Jud.

Even Paul and Jack seemed impressed, though too cautious to accept the fact until there was more proof. Already the foolishness of making an unsupported accusation had been brought home to them, and the scout-master felt that it was his duty to warn Jud and Tom against talking too recklessly of their suspicion.

"Better go slow about it, fellows, no matter what you think," he told them. "The law does not recognize suspicion as counting for anything, unless you have some sort of proof to back it up. It may be those fellows are guilty, for they have been going from bad to worse of late; but until you can show evidence leading that way, button up your lips."

"Guess you're right there, Paul," admitted Jud. "Some of us are apt to be too previous when we get a notion in our heads. But Mr. Briggs is dead sure it was no accident, whether the fire was started by the Lawson crowd or some one else."

"I heard him say he suspected that his safe had been broken open," declared Tom Betts just then, "and that the fire might have been an after thought meant to hide a robbery."

"Whew! that's going some, I must say, if that Lawson gang has come down to burglary, as well as arson," observed Spider Sexton, seriously.

"You'll have to get Jud Mabley away from his cronies mighty quick then, Paul, if you hope to pull him out of the fire," commented Frank.

"Well, for one I've yet to be convinced that they had anything to do with the fire," Paul told them.

"But we know they've had trouble with Mr. Briggs plenty of times," urged another of the scouts.

"And you must remember they were here when we arrived, which looks suspicious," added Bobolink.

"Appearances are often deceitful, Bobolink, as you yourself know to your cost," the scout-master remarked. "If forced to explain their being on the spot so early perhaps they could prove an alibi as well as you. But come, since the fire is all over, and it's pretty shivery out here now, suppose we get back home."

No one offered any objection to this proposal. Indeed, several of the scouts who had worked hard enough to get into a perspiration, were moving about uneasily as though afraid of taking cold.

When the boys left the scene the crowd had thinned out very much, for the wintry night made standing around unpleasant. Besides, most of the people were disgusted with the actions of old Mr. Briggs, and cared very little what his loss might prove to be.

At the time the scouts turned away and headed for another section of the town, the old storekeeper was entering the still smoking building, desirous of examining his safe to ascertain whether it showed signs of having been tampered with.

Once again the boys stood on the corner ready to separate into several factions as their homes chanced to lie.

"There, the fire is out; that's back-taps!" said Tom Betts.

"You're off your base, Tom," Bluff disagreed, "for that's the town clock striking the hour of midnight."

"Sure enough," agreed Tom, when four and five had sounded.

They counted aloud until the whole twelve had struck.

"That means it's Sunday morning. Merry Christmas, Paul, and the rest!" cried Frank.

"The same to you, and good-night, fellows!" called out Paul, as with Jack he strode away.

CHAPTER XII

THE ICEBOAT SQUADRON

At exactly ten o'clock, on Monday morning, December 26th, Bobolink sounded the "Assembly" on his bugle. A great crowd had gathered on the bank of the frozen Bushkill. For the most part this was made up of boys and girls, but there were in addition a few parents who wanted to see the start of the scouts for their midwinter camp.

Up to this time their outings had taken place in a more genial period of the year, and not a few witnessed their departure with feelings of uneasiness. This winter had already proved its title to the stormiest known in a quarter of a century, and at the last hour more than one parent questioned the wisdom of allowing the boys to take the bold tour.

However, there were no "recalls," and as for the ten lads themselves, to look at their eager faces it could be seen that they entertained no doubts regarding their ability to cope with whatever situations arose.

The five iceboats were in line, and could be compared with so many fleet race horses fretting to make a speedy start. Each had various mysterious packages fastened securely, leaving scanty room for the pair of "trippers."

"After all we're going to have a fine day of it," remarked Tom Betts, as he gave a last look to the running gear of his new ice craft, and impatiently waited for Paul to give the word to be off.

"Luck seems to be with us in the start," admitted Bobolink, who was next in line. "I only hope it won't change and slap us too hard after we get up there in the woods."

"I heard this morning that the Lawson crowd had started overland, with packs on their backs," Phil Towns stated.

"Oh! we're bound to rub up against that lot before we're done with it," prophesied Bobolink. "But if they give us any trouble I miss my guess if they won't be sorry for it."

"Scouts can take a heap," said Tom, "but there is a limit to their forbearance; and once they set out to inflict proper punishment they know how to rub it in good and hard."

"Do you really believe there's any truth in that report we heard about Mr. Briggs' safe being found broken open and cleaned out?" asked Phil.

"There's no question about it," replied Bobo-

link. "Though between you and me I don't think the robbers got much of a haul, for the old man is too wise to keep much money around."

"I heard that Hank Lawson and his crowd were spending money pretty freely when they got ready early this morning to start," suggested Tom.

Jack, who had listened to all this talk, took occasion to warn his fellow-scouts, just as Paul had done on the other occasion.

"Better not say that again, Tom, because we have no means of knowing how they got the money. Some of them are often supplied with larger amounts than seem to be good for them. Unless you know positively, don't start the snowball rolling downhill, because it keeps on growing larger every time some one tells the story."

"All right, Jack," remarked Tom, cheerfully; "what you say goes. Besides, as we expect to be away a couple of weeks there isn't going to be much chance to tell tales in Stanhope."

They waited impatiently for the word to go. Paul was making a last round in order to be sure that nothing had been overlooked, for caution was strongly developed in his character, as well as boldness.

There were many long faces among the other boys belonging to Stanhope Troop, for they would have liked above all things to be able to accom-

pany their lucky comrades. The lure of the open woods had a great attraction for them, and on previous outings every one had enjoyed such glorious times that now all felt as though they were missing a grand treat.

At last Paul felt that nothing else remained to be done, and that he could get his expedition under way without any scruple. There were many skaters on the river, but a clear passage down-stream had been made for the start of the iceboat squadron.

A few of the strongest skaters had gone on ahead half an hour back, intending to accompany the adventurous ten a portion of the way. They hoped to reach the point where the old canal connected the Bushkill river with the Radway, and a long time back known as Jackson's Creek.

Here they would await the coming of the fleet iceboats, and lend what assistance was required in making the passage of this crooked waterway.

When once again the bugle sounded the cheering became more violent than ever, for it was known that the moment of departure had arrived.

Tom Betts had been given the honor of being the first in the procession. His fellow passenger was Jack Stormways. As the new *Speedaway* shot from its mooring place and started down the river it seemed as though the old football days had

come again, such a roar arose from human lungs, fish-horns, and every conceivable means for making a racket.

A second craft quickly followed in the wake of the leader, then a third, the two others trailing after, until all of them were heading down-stream, rapidly leaving Stanhope behind.

The cheering of the throng grew fainter as the speedy craft glided over the ice, urged on by a fair wind. There could be little doubt that the ten scouts who were undertaking the expedition were fully alive to the good fortune that had come their way.

Tom Betts was acknowledged to be the most skilful skipper, possibly barring Paul, along the Bushkill. He seemed to know how to get the best speed out of an iceboat, and at the same time avoid serious accidents, such as are likely to follow the reckless use of such frail craft.

It was thoughtful of Paul to let Tom lead the procession, when by all rights, as the scout-master, Paul might properly have assumed that position. Tom must have been considering this fact, for as he and Jack flew along, crouching under the big new sail that was drawing splendidly, he called out to his comrade:

"Let me tell you it was mighty white in Paul to assign me to this berth, Jack, when by rights

everybody expected him to lead off. I appreciate it, too, I want you to understand."

"Oh! that's just like Paul," he was told. "He always likes to make other fellows feel good. And for a chap who unites so many rare qualities in his make-up Paul is the most unassuming fellow I ever knew. Why, you can see that he intentionally put himself in last place, and picked out Spider Sexton's boat to go on, because he knew it was the poorest of the lot."

"But all the same the old *Glider* is doing her prettiest to-day and keeping up with the procession all right," asserted Tom, glancing back.

"That's because Paul's serving as skipper," asserted Jack, proudly. "He could get speed out of any old tub you ever saw. But then we're not trying to do any racing on this trip, you remember, Tom."

"Not much," assented the other, quickly. "Paul impressed it on us that to-day we must keep it in mind that 'safety first' is to be our motto. Besides, with all these bundles of grub and blankets and clothes-bags strapped and roped to our boats a fellow couldn't do himself justice, I reckon."

"No more he could, Tom. But we're making good time for all that, and it isn't going to be long before we pass Manchester, and reach the place where that old abandoned canal creeps across two

miles of country, more or less, to the Radway."

"I can see the fellows who skated down ahead of us!" announced Tom, presently.

"Yes, they're waiting to go through the canal with us," assented Jack. "Wallace Carberry said they feared we might have a bad time of it getting the iceboats over to the Radway, and he corralled a few fellows with the idea of lending a hand."

"They hate the worst kind to be left out of this camping game," remarked Tom, "and want to see the last they can of us."

A few minutes later and the skipper of the leading iceboat brought his speedy craft to a halt close to the shore, where several scouts awaited them. The other four craft soon drew up near by, thus finishing what they were pleased to call the "first leg" of the novel cruise.

It was decided to work their way through the winding creek the best way possible. In places it would be found advisable to push the boats, while now and then as an open stretch came along they might take advantage of a favorable wind to do a little sailing.

Two miles of this sort of thing would not be so bad. As Bobolink sang out, the worst was yet to come when they made the Radway, and had to ascend against a head wind that would necessitate skilful tacking to avoid an overturn.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE WAY

"It all comes back to me again, when I see that frozen mud bank over there, fellows," called out Frank Savage, after they had been pushing their way along the rough canal for some time.

"How many times we did get stuck on just such a mud bank," laughed Paul. "I can shut my eyes even now, and imagine I see some of us wading alongside, and helping to get our motor boats out of the pickle. I think Bobolink must dream of it every once in a while, for he had more than his share of the fun."

"It was bully fun all right, say what you will!" declared the boy mentioned, "though like a good many other things that are past and gone, distance lends enchantment to the view."

"That's right," echoed Tom Betts, "you always seem to forget the discomforts when you look back to that kind of thing, and remember only the jolly good times. I've come home from hunting as tired as a dog, and vowed it would be a long

while before I ever allowed myself to be tempted to go again. But, fellows, if a chum came along the next day and asked me I'd fall to the bait."

A chance to do a little sailing interrupted this pleasant exchange of reminders. But it was for a very short distance only that they were able to take advantage of a favoring breeze; then the boys found it necessary to push the boats again.

Some of them strapped on their skates and set out to draw the laden iceboats as the most logical way of making steady progress.

"What are two measly miles, when such a glorious prospect looms up ahead of us?" cried Sandy. "We ought to be at the old Radway by noon."

"Yes," added Bobolink, quickly. "And I heard Paul saying just now that as we were in no great hurry he meant to call a halt there for an hour or more. We can start a fire and have a bully little warm lunch, just to keep us from starving between now and nightfall, when a regular dinner will be in order."

Of course, this set some of the boys to making fun of Bobolink's well known weakness. The accused scout took it all as good natured joking. Besides, who could get angry when engaged in such a glorious outing as that upon which they were now fully embarked? Certainly not the even-tempered Bobolink.

From time to time the boys recognized various spots where certain incidents had happened to them when on their never-to-be-forgotten motor boat cruise of the preceding summer.

It was well on towards noon when they finally reached the place where the old connecting canal joined the Radway river. It happened, fortunately for the plans of the scouts, that both streams were rather high at the setting in of winter, which accounted for an abundance of ice along the connecting link.

"Looky there, Paul. Could you find a better place for a fire than in that cove back of the point?" demanded Bobolink, evidently bent on reminding the commander-in-chief of his promise.

"You're right about that," admitted Paul, "for the trees and bushes on the point act as a wind break. Head over that way, boys, and let's make a stop for refreshments."

"Good for you, Paul!" cried Spider Sexton, jubilantly. "I skipped the best part of my usual feed this morning, I was so excited and afraid I might get left; and I want to warn you all I'm as empty right now as a drum. So cook enough for an extra man or two when you're about it."

"Huh! you'll take a hand in that job yourself, Spider," asserted Bobolink, pretending to look very stern, though he knew there would be no lack

of volunteers for preparing that first camp meal. Enthusiasm always runs high when boys first go into the woods, but later on it gets to be an old story, and some of the campers have to be drummed into harness.

A fire was soon started, for every one of the scouts knew all about the coaxing of a blaze, no matter how damp the wood might seem. The scouts had learned their lesson in woodcraft, and took pride in excelling one another on occasion.

Then a bustling ensued as several cooks busied themselves in frying ham, as well as some potatoes that had already been boiled at home. When several onions had been mixed with these, after being first fried in a separate pan, the odors that arose were exceedingly palatable to the hungry groups that stood around awaiting the call to lunch.

Coffee had been made in the two capacious tin pots, for on such a bracing day as this they felt they needed something to warm their systems. Plenty of condensed milk had been brought along, and a can of this was opened by puncturing the top in two places. Thus, if not emptied at a sitting, a can can be sealed up again, and kept over for another occasion.

"As good a feed as I ever want to enjoy!" was the way Bobolink bubbled over as he reached for

his second helping, meanwhile keeping a wary eye on the boy who had warned them as to his enormous capacity for food.

"It is mighty fine," agreed Wallace Carberry, "but somehow, fellows, it seems like a funeral feast to me, because it's the last time I'll be able to join you. Never felt so bad in my life before. Shed a few tears for me once in a while, won't you?"

The others laughingly promised to accommodate him. Truth to tell, most of them did feel very sorry for Wallace and the other boys whose parents had debarred them from all this pleasure before them.

When the hour was up another start was made. This time they headed up the erratic Radway. The skaters still clung to them, bent on seeing all they could of those whom they envied so much.

Progress was sometimes very tedious, because the wind persisted in meeting them head on, and it is not the easiest task in the world to force an iceboat against a negative breeze. Tacking had to be resorted to many times, and each mile they gained was well won.

The boys enjoyed the exhilarating exercise, however, and while there were a few minor accidents nothing serious interfered with their progress.

It was two o'clock when they sighted Lake

Tokala ahead of them. Shouts of joy from those in advance told the glad story to the toilers in the rear. This quickened their pulses, and made them all feel that the worst was now over.

When the broad reaches of the lake had been gained they were able to make speed once more. It was the best part of the entire trip—the run across the wide lake. And how the sight of Cedar Island brought back most vividly recollections of the happy and exciting days spent there not many months before!

Wallace and his three chums still held on. They declared they were bound to stick like "leeches" until they had seen the expedition safely across the lake. What if night did overtake them before they got back to the Bushkill again? There would be a moon, and skating would be a pleasure under such favorable conditions.

"Don't see any signs of another wild man on the island, do you, Jack?" asked Tom Betts, as the *Speedaway* fairly flew past the oasis in the field of ice that was crowned by a thick growth of cedars, which had given the island its name.

"Nothing doing in that line, Tom," replied the other with a laugh. "Such an adventure happens to ordinary fellows only once in a life-time. But then something just as queer may be sprung on us in the place we're heading for."

The crossing of Tokala Lake did not consume a great deal of time, for the wind had shifted just enough to make it favor them more or less much of the way over.

"I c'n see smoke creeping up at the point Paul's heading for," announced Tom Betts. "That must come from the cabin we heard had been built here since we had our outing on the lake."

"We were told that it stood close to the mouth of the creek which we have to ascend some miles," remarked Jack. "And this man is the one we think to leave our boats in charge of while away in the woods."

"I only hope then that he'll be a reliable keeper," observed Tom, seriously, "for it would nearly break my heart if anything happened to the *Speedaway* now. I've only tried her out a few times, but she gives promise of beating anything ever built in this section of the country. I don't believe I could duplicate her lines again if I tried."

"Don't borrow trouble," Jack told him. "We'll dismantle the boats all we can before we leave them, and the chances are ten to one we'll find them O.K. when we come out of the woods two weeks from now. But here we are at the place, and the boys who mean to return home will have to say good-bye."

CHAPTER XIV

THE RING OF STEEL RUNNERS

As the little flotilla of ice yachts drew up close to the shore, the sound of boyish laughter must have been heard, for a man was seen approaching. He came from the direction of the cabin which they had sighted among the trees, and from the mud and stone chimney of which smoke was ascending straight into the air—a promise of continued good weather.

The boys were climbing up the bank when he reached them. So far as they could see he appeared to be a rough but genial man, and Paul believed they could easily trust him to take care of the boats while away.

"I suppose you are Abe Turner, spoken of by Mr. Garrity?" was the way Paul addressed the man, holding out his hand in friendly greeting.

The other's face relaxed into a smile. Evidently he liked this manly looking young chap immediately, as most people did, for Paul had a peculiarly winning way about him.

"That's my name, and I reckon now you must be Paul," said the other.

"Why, how did you know that?" demanded Bobolink, in surprise.

"Oh! I had a letter from Mr. Thomas Garrity telling me all about you boys, and ordering me to do anything you might want. You see he owns all the country around here, an' I'm holding the fort until spring, when there's going to be some big timber cutting done. We expect to get it to market down the Radway."

The scouts exchanged pleased looks.

"Bully for Mr. Thomas Garrity!" shouted Tom Betts, "he's all to the good, if his conversion to liking boys did come late in life. He's bound to make up for all the lost time now. Three cheers, fellows, for our good friend!"

They were given with a rousing will, and the echoes must have alarmed some of the shy denizens of the snow forest, for a fox was seen to scurry across an open spot, and a bevy of crows in some not far distant oak trees started to caw and call.

"All we want you to do for us, Abe," explained Paul, "is to take good care of our five iceboats, which we will have to leave with you."

"And we might as well tell you in the beginning," added Bobolink, "that several tough chaps

from our town have come up here to spend some time, just from learning of our plans."

"Yes," went on Tom Betts, the anxious one, "and nothing would tickle that Hank Lawson and his gang so much as to be able to sneak some of our boats away, or, failing that, to smash them into kindling wood with an axe."

Abe nodded his shaggy head and smiled.

"I've heard some things about Hank Lawson," he observed. "But take it from me that if he comes around my shanty trying any of his tricks he'll get a lesson he'll never forget. I'll see to it that your boats are kept safe. I've two dogs off hunting in the woods just now, but I'll fasten 'em nigh where you store the boats. I'm sorry for the boy who gets within the grip of Towser's teeth, yes, or Clinch's either."

That was good news to Tom, who smiled as though finally satisfied that there was really nothing to be feared.

"Sorry to say we'll have to be leaving you, boys," announced Wallace just then, as he started to go the rounds with a mournful face, shaking hands with each lucky scout whom he envied so much.

"Hope you have the time of your lives," called out another of those who were debarred from enjoying the outing.

These boys started away, looking back from time to time as they crossed wide Lake Tokala. Finally, with a last parting salute, they darted into the mouth of the canal and were lost to view.

There was an immediate bustle, for time was flitting, and much remained to be done. The five owners of the iceboats proceeded to dismantle them, which was not a tedious proceeding. The masts were unstepped and hidden in a place by themselves. The sails were taken into the cabin of Abe, where they would be safe.

Meanwhile, the other boys had been engaged in making up the various packs which from now on must be shouldered by each member of the expedition. Experience in such things allowed them to accomplish more in a given time than novices would have been able to do.

"Everything seems to be ready, Paul," announced Jack after a while, as they gathered around, each boy striving to fix his individual pack upon his back, and getting some other fellow to adjust the straps.

Bobolink seemed to have half again as much as any of the others, though this was really all his own doing. Besides his usual share of the luggage he had pots and pans and skillets sticking out in all directions, so that he presented the appearance of a traveling tinker.

"It's a great pity, Bobolink," said Tom Betts, with a grin, as he surveyed his comrade after helping the other load up, "that you were born about seventy-five years too late."

"Tell me why," urged the other.

"Think what a peddler you would have made! You'd have been a howling success hawking your goods around the country."

Of course they had all adjusted their skates before taking up their packs; for bending down would really have been next to a physical impossibility after those weighty burdens had been assumed.

"Hope you have a right good time, boys," said Abe Turner in parting. "And don't any of you worry about these boats. When you come back this way you'll find everything slick and neat here."

"Good for you, Abe," cried Tom Betts. "And make up your mind to it the Banner Boy Scouts never forget their friends. You're on the list, Abe. Good-bye!"

They were off at last, and it was high time, for the short December day was already getting well along toward its close. Night would come almost before they knew it, though they had no reason to expect anything like darkness, with that moon now much more than half full up there in the heavens.

Some of the boys had noticed the mouth of this creek when camping on Cedar Island the previous summer. They had been so much occupied with fishing, taking flashlight pictures of little wild animals in their native haunts, and in solving certain mysteries that came their way that none of them had had time to explore the stream.

On this account then it would prove to be a new bit of country for them, and this fact rather pleased most of the boys, as they dearly loved to prowl around in a section they had never visited before.

Strung out in a straggling procession they skated along. The creek was about as crooked as anything could well be, a fact that influenced Bobolink to shout out:

"In the absence of a better name, fellows, I hereby christen this waterway Snake Creek; any objections?"

"It deserves the name, all right," commented Spider Sexton, "for I never saw such a wiggly stream in all my born days."

"Seems as if we had already come all of five miles, and nary a sign of a cabin ahead yet that I can see," observed Phil Towns, presently, for Phil was really beginning to feel pretty well used up, not being quite so sturdy as some others among the ten scouts.

"That's the joke," laughed Paul; "and it's on me I guess more than any one else. I thought of nearly a thousand things, seems to me, but forgot to ask any one just how far it was up to the cabin from the lake by way of this scrambling creek."

"Why, I'm sure Mr. Garrity said something like six miles!" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, but that may have meant as the crow flies, straightaway," returned the scout-master.

"At the worst then, Paul," Bobolink ventured to say, "we can camp, and spend a night in the open under the hemlocks. Veteran scouts have no need to be afraid to tackle such a little game as that, with plenty of grub and blankets along."

"Hear! hear!" said Phil Towns. "And as the sun has set already I for one wouldn't care how soon you decided to do that stunt."

"Oh! we ought to be good for another hour or so anyway, Phil," Tom told him, at which the other only grunted and struck manfully out again.

As evening closed in about them, the shadows began to creep out of the heavy growth of timber by which the skaters were surrounded.

"Look! look! a deer!" shrieked Sandy Griggs, suddenly. Thrilled by the cry the others looked ahead just in time to see a flitting form disappear in the thick fringe of shrubbery that lined one side of the creek.

CHAPTER XV

TOLLY TIP AND THE FOREST CABIN

"Oh! that's too bad!" exclaimed Spider Sexton, "I've been telling everybody we'd taste venison of our own killing while off on this trip, and there the first deer we've glimpsed gives us the merry ha-ha!"

"Rotten luck!" grumbled Jud Elderkin. "And me with a rifle gripped in my fist all the time. But I only had a glimpse of a brown object disappearing in the brush, and I never want to just *wound* a deer so it will suffer. That's why I didn't fire when I threw my gun up."

"With me," explained Jack Stormways, "it happened that Bluff here was just in my way when I had the chance to aim."

"Well," laughed Bobolink, "you might have shot straight through his head, because it's a vacuum. I once heard a teacher tell him so when he failed in his lessons every day for a week."

"Oh! there's bound to be plenty of deer where you can see one so easily," Paul told them, "so

cheer up. Unless I miss my guess we'll have all sorts of game to eat while up here in the snow woods. Abe said it was a big season for fur and feather this year."

They kept plodding along and put more miles behind them. The moon now had to be relied on to afford them light, because the last of the sunset glow had departed from the western heavens.

Phil was beginning to feel very tired, and feared he would have to give up unless inside of another mile or two they arrived at their intended destination. Being a proud boy he detested showing any signs of weakness, and clinched his teeth more tightly together as he pressed on, keeping a little behind the rest, so that no one should hear his occasional groan.

All at once a glad cry broke out ahead, coming from Sandy Griggs, who at the moment chanced to be in the van.

"I reckon that's a jolly big fire yonder, fellows, unless I miss my guess!" he told them.

"It is a fire, sure thing," agreed Bobolink.

"Tolly Tip has been looking for us, it seems, and has built a roaring blaze out of doors to serve as a guide to our faltering steps!" announced Jud, pompously, although he could hardly have been referring to himself, for his pace seemed to be just as swift and bold as when he first set out.

"It's less than half a mile away I should say, even with this crooked stream to navigate," announced Bobolink, more to comfort Phil than anything else.

"Keep going right along, and don't bother about me, I'm all right," called the latter, cheerfully, from the rear.

In a short time the scouts drew near what proved to be a roaring fire built on the bank of the creek. They could see a man moving about, and he must have already heard their voices in the near distance for he was shading his eyes with his hand, and looking earnestly their way.

"Hello, Tolly Tip!" cried out the boisterous Bobolink. "Here we come, right-side up with care! How's Mrs. Tip, and all the little Tips?"

This was only a boyish joke, for they had already been told by Mr. Garrity that the keeper of the hunting lodge was a jolly old bachelor. But Bobolink must have his say regardless of everything. They heard the trapper laugh as though he immediately fell in with the spirit of fun that these boys carried with them.

"He's all right!" exclaimed Bobolink, on catching that boisterous laugh. "Who's all right? Tolly Tip, the keeper of Deer Head Lodge, situated in Garrity Camp! For he's a jolly good fellow, which none can deny!"

Amidst all this laughter and chatter the ten scouts arrived at the spot where the welcoming blaze awaited them, to receive a warm welcome from the queer, old fellow who took care of Mr. Garrity whenever the latter chose to hide away from his business vexations up here in the woods.

The boys could see immediately that Tolly Tip was about as queer as his name would indicate. At the same time they believed they would like him. His blue eyes twinkled with good humor, and he had a droll Irish brogue that was bound to add to the flavor of the stories they felt sure he had on the end of his tongue.

"Sure, it's delighted I am to say the lot av yees this night," he said as they came crowding around, each wanting to shake his hand fiercely. "Mr. Garrity towld me in the letther he was after sindin' up with the tame that ye war a foine bunch av lads, that would be afther kapin' me awake all right. And sure I do belave 'twill be so."

"I hope we won't bother you too much while we're here," said Paul, understanding what an energetic crowd he was piloting on this excursion.

"Ye couldn't do the same if ye tried," Tolly Tip declared, heartily. "I have to be alone most all the long winther, an' it do be a great trate to hav' some lively lads visit me for a s'ason. Fetch the packs along wid ye into the cabin. I want

to make ye sorry for carrying all this stuff wid ye up here."

His words mystified them until, having entered the capacious cabin built of hewn logs, with the chinks well filled with hard mortar, they were shown a wagonload of groceries which Mr. Garrity had actually taken secret pleasure in purchasing without letting the boys know anything about it.

A team had found its way across the miles of intervening woods, and delivered this magnificent present at the forest lodge. It was intended to be a surprise to the boys, and Mr. Garrity certainly overwhelmed them with his generosity.

Bobolink alone was seen to stand and gaze regretfully at the small edition of a grocery store, meanwhile shaking his head sorrowfully.

"What ails you, Bobolink?" demanded one of his chums.

"It can't be done, no matter how many meals a day we try to make way with," the other solemnly announced. "I've been calculating, and there's enough stuff there to feed us a month. Then, besides, think of what we toted along. Shucks! why didn't Nature make boys with India rubber stomachs."

"Some fellows I happen to know have already been favored in that line," hinted Tom Betts, ma-

liciously; "but as for the rest of us, we have to get along with just the old-fashioned kind."

"Cheer up, Bobolink," laughed Paul; "what we can't devour we'll be only too glad to leave to our good friend Tolly Tip here. The chances are he'll know what to do with everything so none of it will be wasted."

"When a man who all his life has been as tight-fisted as Mr. Garrity does wake up," said Phil Towns, "he goes to the other extreme, and shames a lot of people who've been calling themselves charitable."

"Oh! that's because he has so much to make up, I guess," explained Jud.

While some of the boys started in to get a good supper ready the others went around taking a look at the cabin in the snowy woods that was to be their home for the next twelve days.

It had been strongly built to resist the cold, though as a rule the owner did not come up here after the leaves were off the forest trees. A stove in one room could be used to keep it as warm as toast when foot-long lengths of wood were fed to its capacious maw. The fire in the big open hearth served to heat the other room, and over this the cooking was also done.

Several bunks gave promise of snug sleeping quarters. As these would accommodate only four

it was evident that lots must be cast to see who the lucky quartette would prove to be.

"To-morrow," said Paul, when speaking of this lack of accommodations, "one of the very first things we do will be to fix other bunks, because every scout should have a decent place for his bed. There's plenty of room in here to make a regular scout dormitory of it."

"Fine!" commented Tom Betts; "and those of us who draw the short straws can manage somehow with our blankets on the floor for one night, I guess."

"We've all slept soundly on harder beds than that, let me tell you," asserted Bobolink, "and for one I decline to draw a straw. Me for the soft side of a plank to-night, you hear."

The other boys knew that Bobolink, in his generosity, really had in mind Phil and one or two more of the boys, not quite so accustomed to roughing it as others of the campers.

That supper, eaten under such novel surroundings, would long be remembered; for while these boys were old hands at camping, up to now they had never spent any time in the open while Jack Frost had his stamp on all nature, and the earth was covered with snow.

It was, all things considered, one of the greatest evenings in their lives.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FIRST NIGHT OUT

"WELL, it's started in to snow!"

Jud Elderkin made this surprising statement after he had gone to the door to take a peep at the weather.

"You must be fooling, Jud," expostulated Tom, "because when I looked out not more'n fifteen minutes ago the moon was shining like everything."

"All right, that may be, but she's blanketed behind the clouds right now, and the snow's coming down like fun," asserted Jud.

"Seems that we didn't get here any too soon, then," chuckled Bluff.

"Oh! a little snow wouldn't have bothered us any," laughed Jack. "We'd never think of minding a heavy fall at home, and why should we worry now?"

"That's a fact," Bobolink went on to remark, with a look of solid satisfaction on his beaming face. "Plenty of wood under the shed near by,

and enough grub to feed an army. We're all right."

After several of them had gone to verify Jud's statement, and had brought back positive evidence in the shape of snowballs, the boys again clustered around the jolly fire and continued to talk on various subjects that chanced to interest them.

"I wonder now," remarked Bobolink, finally, "if Hank took Mr. Briggs' money as well as set fire to his store."

As this was the first mention that had been made concerning this subject Tolly Tip showed considerable interest.

"Is it the ould storekeeper in Stanhope ye mane?" he asked. "Because I did me tradin' with the same the short time I was in town, and sorry a bargain did I ever sacure from Misther Briggs."

"Plenty of other people are in the same boat with you there, Tolly Tip," Sandy told him with a chuckle. "But his run of good luck has met with a snag. Somebody set fire to his store, which was partly burned down the other night."

"Yes, and the worst part of it," added Bobolink, "was that Mr. Briggs accidentally, or on purpose, let his insurance policy lapse, so that he can get no damages on account of this fire."

"And the last thing we heard before coming away," Phil Towns went on to say, "was that the

safe had been broken open and robbed. Poor old Levi Briggs' cup is full to overflowing I guess. Everything seems to be coming his way in a bunch."

"I suspect that this Hank ye're tillin' me about must be a wild harum-scarum broth av a boy thin?" remarked the old woodsman, puffing at his pipe contentedly.

"He is the toughest boy in town," said Phil.

"And several others train with him who aim to beat his record if they can," Spider Sexton hastened to add as his contribution.

"There's absolutely nothing they wouldn't try if they thought they could get some fun or gain out of it," declared Jud emphatically.

"Do till!" exclaimed their host, shaking his head dolefully as though he disliked knowing that any boys could sink to such a low level.

"Why, only the other day," said Bobolink, "Jack and I saw the gang pick on a couple of tramps who had just come out of Briggs' store. So far as we knew the hoboes hadn't offered to say a word to Hank and his crowd, but the fellows ran them out of town with a shower of stones. Didn't they, Jack?"

"Yes. And we saw one tramp get a hard blow on the head from a rock, in the bargain," assented Jack.

"Wow! but they were a mad pair, let me tell you," concluded Bobolink.

"By the same token," observed Tolly Tip, "till me av one of the tramps had on an ould blue army coat wid rid linin' to the same?"

Bobolink uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Just what he did, I give you my word!" he replied hastily.

"And was the other chap a long-legged hobo, wid a face that made ye think av the sharp idge av a hatchet?" the old trapper questioned.

"I reckon you must have seen the pair yourself, Tolly Tip!" observed Bobolink. "Were you in Stanhope, or did they happen to pass this way?"

At that the taker of furs touched his cheek just below his eye with the tip of his finger, and smiled humorously.

" 'Tis the black eye they were afther giving me early this day, sure it was," he explained. "Not two miles away from here it happened, where the road cuts through the woods like a knife blade. I'd been out to look at a few traps set in that section whin I kim on the spalpeens. We had words, and the shorter chap wid the army coat ran, but the other engaged me. Before he cut stick he managed to lave the imprission av his fists on me face, bad luck to the same."

"I guess after all, Jack," remarked Bobolink, "they must be a couple of hard cases, and Hank did the town a service when he chased them off."

"It would be the first time on record then that the Lawson crowd was of any benefit to the community," Jack commented; "but accidents will happen, you know. They didn't mean to do a good turn, only have what they call fun."

"So the shorter rascal didn't have any fight in him, it seems, Tolly Tip?" Bobolink observed, as though the subject interested him considerably.

"Oh! as for that," replied the trapper, "mebbe he do be afther thinkin' discretion was the better part av valor. Ye say, he had one av his hands wrapped up in a rag, and I suspect he must have been hurt."

"That's interesting, at any rate!" declared Bobolink. "When we saw him he had the use of both hands. Something must have happened after that. I wonder what."

"You're the greatest fellow to *wonder* I ever knew," laughed Sandy Griggs.

"Bobolink likes to grapple with mysteries," said Jud, "and from now on he'll keep bothering his head about that tramp's injured hand, wanting to know whether he cut himself with a broken bottle, or burned his fingers when cooking his coffee in an old tomato can over the campfire."

"Let Bobolink alone, boys," said Paul. "If he chooses to amuse himself in that way what's the odds? Who knows but what he may surprise us with a wonderful discovery some day."

"Thank you, Paul," the other remarked drily.

After that the subject was dropped. It did not offer much of interest to the other scouts, but Paul, glancing towards Bobolink several times, could easily see that he was pondering over something.

After all, the snow did not last long. Before they finally went to bed they found that the moon had once more appeared through a rift in the clouds, and not more than two inches of fresh snow had covered the ground.

There was considerable skirmishing around done when the boys commenced to make their final preparations for spending the first night in their winter camp. No one would think of taking Tolly Tip's bunk when he generously offered it, and so straws were drawn for the remaining three, as well as the cot upon which Mr. Garrity slept when up at his Deer Head Lodge.

The fortunate ones turned out to be Paul, Bluff, Frank and Bobolink, though the last mentioned declared positively that he preferred sleeping on the floor as a novelty, and insisted that Phil Towns occupy his bunk.

They managed to make themselves comfortable after a fashion, though the appearance of the "dormitory" excited considerable laughter, with the boys sprawled out in every direction.

All of the boys were up early, and they were eager to take up the many plans they had laid out for the day. Breakfast was the first thing on the calendar; and while it was being prepared and dispatched the tongues of that half score of boys ran on like the water over the wheel of the old mill, with a constant clatter.

There was no necessity for all of them to remain at home to work on the new bunks, so Paul picked out several to assist him in that work. The others were at liberty to carry out such scout activities as most appealed to their fancy. Some planned to go off with the woodsman to see how he managed with his steel traps, by means of which, during the winter, he expected to lay by quite a good-sized bundle of valuable fur. Then there was wood to chop, pictures to be taken, favorable places to be found for setting the camera during a coming night so as to get a flashlight view of a fox or a mink in the act of stealing the bait, as well as numerous other pleasant duties and diversions, all of which had been eagerly planned for the preceding night as the boys sat before the crackling fire.

CHAPTER XVII

"TIP-UPS" FOR PICKEREL

TOM BETTS came up from the frozen creek.

"I don't believe that little snow ought to keep us from trying the scheme we laid out between us, Jack," he said, looking entreatingly at the other.

"Why, no, there wasn't enough to hurt the skating," replied the other, readily, much to Tom's evident satisfaction.

"Bully for you, Jack!" he exclaimed. "There was more or less wind blowing at the time, and the snow was pretty dry, so it blew off the ice. We can easily make the lake in an hour I reckon, with daylight to help us. Besides, we know the way by this time, you see."

"All right!" called out Frank, who had been detailed to assist Paul in the making of the extra bunks out of some spare boards that lay near by, having been brought into the woods for some purpose, though never used.

"Remember, you two fishermen," warned Paul, "we'll all have our mouths set for pickerel to-

night, so don't dare disappoint us, or there will be a riot in the camp."

"We've just got to get those fish, Jack," said Tom, with mock solemnity, "even if we have to go in ourselves after them. Our lives wouldn't be worth a pinch of salt in this crowd if they had to go pickerelless to-night."

"Oh! that'll do! Be off with you!" roared Jud Elderkin, making out to throw a frying-pan at Tom's head.

When at the lake talking to the man who had agreed to look after their iceboats during their absence, the boys had learned that there was fine fishing through the ice to be had at this season of the year.

Abe Turner had also informed them that should they care to indulge in the sport at any time, and should skate down to his cabin, he would show them just how it was done. What was more to the point, he had a store of live minnows in a spring-hole that never froze up, even in the hardest winter, he had been told.

This then was the object that drew the two scouts, both of them exceedingly fond of fishing in every way. None of the boys had ever fished through the ice, it happened, though they knew how it was done.

Accordingly, Tom and Jack set off down the

creek, their skate runners sending back that clear ringing sound that is music in the ears of every lad who loves the outdoor sports of winter.

Jack carried his gun along. Not that he had any particular intention of hunting, for others had taken that upon themselves as a part of the day's routine, but then a deer might happen to cross their path, and such a chance if it came would be too good to lose.

"You see," commented Tom, after a mile or so had been placed to their credit, "the snow isn't going to bother us the least bit. And I never enjoyed skating any better than right now."

"Same here," Jack told him. "And we certainly couldn't find ourselves surrounded by a prettier scene, with every twig covered with snow."

"Listen!"

Both of them stopped when Tom called in this fashion, and strained their ears to catch a repetition of the sound Tom had heard.

"Oh! that's only a fox barking," said Jack. "I've heard them do it many a time. You know they belong to the dog family, just as the wolf and jackel and hyena do. Tolly Tip has a couple of fox pelts already, and he says they are very numerous this year. Come on, let's be moving again."

So they pursued their winding way down the

straggling creek, first turning to the right and then to the left.

"It's been just an hour since we left camp," remarked Jack at length, "and there you can catch a glimpse of the lake through the trees yonder."

Abe Turner was surprised as well as pleased to find two of the boys at his door that morning.

"Didn't expect us back so soon, did you, Abe?" laughed Tom. "But in laying out the plans for to-day we found that some of the boys were fish hungry, so we decided to run down and take you up on your proposition."

"Nothing would please me better," Abe told them. "And it is about as good a day for ice fishing as anybody'd want to set eyes on. I'll go right away and get my lines. Then we'll pick up a pail, and put some of my minnows in it."

Before long they were out upon the ice of Lake Tokala, Tom carrying an axe, Jack the various lines and "tip-ups" that were to signal when a fish had been hooked, and Abe with the live bait in a tin bucket.

The day was not a bitterly cold one, and this promised to make fishing agreeable work.

"On the big lakes where they do a heap of this kind of work," explained their guide as they went toward Cedar Island, "the men build little shanties out on the ice, where they can keep fairly warm.

You see sometimes the weather is terribly cold. But a day like this makes it a pleasure to be out."

Coming to a place where Abe knew from previous experience that a good haul could be made, the first hole was cut in the ice. As winter was still young this did not prove to be a hard task.

Abe had marked a dozen places where these holes were to be chopped, but the boys chose to watch him set his first line. After the novelty had worn off they would be ready to take a hand themselves.

There are many sorts of "tip-ups" used in this species of sport, but Abe's kind answered all purposes and was very simple, being possibly the original "tip-up."

He would take a branch that had a certain kind of fork as thick around as his little finger. In cutting this he left two short "feet" and one long one. To Tom's mind it looked something like an old-fashioned cannon, with the line securely tied to the short projecting muzzle.

When the fish took hold this point was pulled down, with the result that the longer "tail" shot up into the air, the outstretched legs preventing the fork from being drawn into the hole.

At the end of the long "tail" Abe had fastened a small piece of red flannel. When a dozen lines were out it often kept a man busy running this

way and that to attend to the numerous calls as signaled by the upraised red flags.

"Now that we know just how it's done," said Tom, after they had seen the bait fastened to the hook and dropped into the lake, "we'll get busy cutting all those other holes. My turn next, Jack, you remember. Watch my smoke."

They had hardly finished the second hole before they heard Abe laughing, and glancing toward him discovered that he was holding up a two-pound, struggling pickerel.

"First blood for Abe!" cried Tom. "But if they keep on biting it'll be our chance soon, Jack. My stars! but that is a beaut, though. A dozen like that would make the boys stare, I tell you."

When Abe had arranged four lines he would not hear of the boys cutting any more holes.

"I'll dig out a couple to make an even half dozen," he told them. "And the way the pike are biting to-day I reckon we'll get a good mess."

"All right, then," agreed Tom, much relieved, for he wanted to be pulling in the fish rather than doing the drudgery. "I'll look after these two holes, Jack, and you skirmish around the others. And by jinks! if I haven't got one right now!"

"The same here," shouted the equally excited Jack. "Whew! how he does pull though! Must be a whopper this time. I hope I don't lose him!"

Fortune favored the ice fishermen, for both captives were saved, and they proved to be even larger than the first one taken.

So the fun went on. At times it slackened more or less, only to begin again with new momentum. The pile of fish on the ice, rapidly freezing, once they were exposed to the air, increased until at noon they had all they could think of carrying home.

"The rest of the day we'll take things easy, and lay in a stock for Abe here," suggested Tom; for the guide had told them he meant to cure as many of the fish as he could secure, since later on in the winter they would be much more difficult to catch, and it would be a long time until April came with its break-up of the ice.

The boys certainly enjoyed every minute of their stay at the lake. Jack was wise enough to know that they had better start for camp about three o'clock. It might not be quite so easy going back, as they would be tired, and the wind was against them.

They had skated for over half an hour, with their heavy packs on their backs, when again Tom called to his comrade to listen.

"And believe me it wasn't a fox that time, Jack!" he declared, "but, as sure as you live, it sounded like somebody calling weakly for help!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HELPING HAND OF A SCOUT

When Jack, listening, caught the same sound, he turned upon his companion with a serious expression on his face.

"Let's kick off our skates and hang our packs up in the crotch of this tree, Tom," he said.

"Then you expect to investigate, and find out what it means, do you?"

"We'd feel pretty mean if we went on our way like the Levite in the old story of the Good Samaritan," remarked Jack, busily disengaging his bundle of fish which Abe had done up in a piece of old bagging.

"I'm the last one to do such a thing," asserted Tom, "only I chanced to remember that there are some tough boys up here somewhere—Hank and his crowd—and I was wondering if this could be a trick to get us to put our fingers in a trap."

Jack chuckled, and held up his gun.

"We ought to be able to take care of ourselves with this," he told his chum.

"Right you are, Jack! So let's be on the jump. There! that sounded like a big groan, didn't it? Somebody's in a peck of trouble. Maybe a wood-chopper has had a tree fall on him or cut his foot with his axe, and is bleeding badly."

"Just what I had in mind," remarked the other, as they started into the shrubbery.

The groans continued; therefore, the two scouts had no difficulty in going directly to the spot. In a few minutes Tom clutched his chum's sleeve and pointed directly ahead.

"Ginger! it looks like Sim Jeffreys," he whispered.

"No other," added Jack.

"But what's the matter with the fellow?" continued Tom. "See how he keeps tugging away at his right leg. I bet you he's gone and got it caught in a root, and can't work it free. I've been through just such an experience."

"We'll soon find out," remarked Jack, pushing forward.

"Be mighty careful, Jack," urged the other, not yet wholly convinced that the groans were really genuine, for he knew how tricky Sim Jeffreys had always been.

By this time the other had become aware of their presence. He turned an agonized face toward them, upon which broke a gleam of wild

hope. If Sim Jeffreys were playing a part then, Jack thought, he must be a clever actor.

"Oh, say! ain't I glad to see you boys," he called, holding both his hands out toward them. "Come, help me get free from this pesky old trap here!"

"Trap!" echoed Tom. "Just what do you mean by that, Sim?"

"I ain't tryin' to fool you, boys. Sure I ain't!" exclaimed the other, anxiously. "Seems to me like an old bear trap, though I never saw one before. I was out with my gun, lookin' for partridges, when all of a sudden it jumped up and grabbed me right by the leg."

Neither of the boys could believe this strange story until they had taken a look. Then they saw that it was just as Sim had declared. The trap was old and very rusty. Jack saw that it had lost much of its former fierce grip, which was lucky for poor Sim, for otherwise he might have had his leg badly injured.

Still the jaws retained enough force to hold the boy securely; though had Sim retained his presence of mind, instead of tugging wildly to break away, he might have found it possible to bear down on the weakened springs and set himself free.

Tom and Jack quickly did this service for the

other, who was profuse in his expressions of gratitude, though neither of the scouts believed in his sincerity, for Sim had a reputation for being slippery and double-faced.

"Why, I might have frozen to death here to-night," he told them. "Even if I had lived till to-morrow I'd have starved sure. The bears would have got me too, or the wildcats."

"Didn't you call when you first got caught?" asked Tom.

"I should say I did, till I could hardly whisper, but nobody seemed to hear me shout," came the reply, as Sim rubbed his swollen and painful leg. "Guess I'll have to limp all the way back to the hole in the rocks where the rest of the boys are campin'."

"How far away from here is it?" asked Jack, wondering whether they ought to do anything more for Sim or let him shift for himself.

"Oh, a mile and more, due west," the boy told them. "Where that hill starts up, see? We haven't got much grub along with us, b'cause, you see, we depended on shooting heaps of game. But so far I've knocked down only one bird."

"Do you think you can make it, Sim?" persisted Jack.

The fellow limped around a little before replying.

"I reckon I kin. Though I'll be pretty sore to-morrow like as not, after this silly thing grabbin' me the way it did. I know my way home, boys, never fear, and I'll turn up there sooner or later. Much obliged for your help."

With that Sim started off as though eager to get his hard work over with. And as there was nothing more to be done, the two chums returned to the creek, shouldered their heavy packs after resuming their skates, and went on their way.

It was just about dusk when they made the cabin on the bank of Snake Creek; and as the others discovered their burdens a shout of joy went up.

"The country's safe," said Jud, "since you've brought home a stack of fine pickerel. Let's see what they look like, fellows."

At sight of the big fish the boys were loud in their congratulations.

"Wouldn't mind having a try at that fun myself one of these days," asserted Jud, enviously. "Paul, jot it down that I'm to be your side partner when you take a notion to go down to the lake."

"Some of you get busy here fixing the fish, if we mean to have them to-night," remarked Jack, who was too tired to think of doing it himself.

"Too late for that this evening. We've got supper all ready for you. The fish will have to keep till to-morrow," announced Bobolink.

"What's this I smell in the air?" demanded Tom. "Don't tell me you've bagged a deer already?"

"Just what we have!" said Bobolink, his eyes glistening so, that it required little effort to decide who the lucky hunter was.

"Why, he wasn't away from camp an hour," asserted Phil Towns, "when we heard him whooping, and in he came with a young buck on his back. I never thought Bobolink was strong enough to tote that load a mile and more."

"Huh! I'd have carried in an elephant if it had dropped to my gun, I felt that good!" declared the happy hunter.

"But all the adventures haven't fallen to you fellows who stayed here in camp or wandered about in the adjacent woods," announced Tom, mysteriously.

"What else have you been doing besides catching that dandy mess of fish?" asked the scoutmaster, voicing the curiosity of the entire crowd.

"Say! did you shoot some game, too—a deer, a wildcat, or maybe a big black bear?" demanded Bobolink, eagerly.

"No, the gun was never fired," continued Tom. "But we've got a right to turn our badges over for this day, because we performed a Good Samaritan act."

"Go on and tell us about it!" urged Sandy Griggs.

"We heard groans, and weak calls for help," said Tom, unable to keep back his news any longer, though he would have liked very much to continue tantalizing the others, "and after we had kicked off our skates and hung our packs in a tree, we went over into the woods and found——"

"What?" roared several of the curious scouts in unison.

"Who but our fellow townsman, Sim Jeffreys, whining and groaning to beat the band," continued the narrator. "It seems that he had got caught in a trap, and expected to be frozen to death to-night, or starve there to-morrow."

"A trap, did ye say?" asked Tolly Tip. And Paul noticed a sudden look of enlightenment come into his face.

"Tell us what sort of a trap, Tom?" urged Bobolink.

"A regular bear trap!" replied the one addressed.

"Oh, come now! you're trying to play some sort of trick on us, fellows," cried Spider Sexton. "How ever would a real bear trap come there?"

"Ask Tolly Tip," suggested Paul.

"That's right, lads, I know all about that trap," admitted the old woodsman, as he grinned at

them. "I had an ole bear trap that had lost its grip and wasn't wuth much. I sot the same in the woods, but nothin' iver kim nigh it, and so I jest forgets all about the same. But bless me sowl I niver dramed it'd be afther grippin' a lad by the leg. All he had to do was to push down on the springs, and he'd been loose."

"I could see that plainly enough," admitted Jack. "The trouble was Sim fell into a panic as soon as he found himself caught, and all he could do was to squirm and pull and shout and groan. It shows the foolishness of letting a thing scare you out of your seven senses."

"But do you mean to say there are real, live bears around here, Tolly Tip?" demanded Bobolink, his eyes nearly round with excitement.

"There's one rogue av a bear that I've tried to git for this two year, but by the same token he's been too smart for the likes av me."

"That interests me a whole lot," remarked Paul; "and I mean to devote much of my spare time to trying to shoot that same bear with my camera in order to get a flashlight picture of him in his native haunts!"

CHAPTER XIX

NEWS OF BIG GAME

"FAITH and would ye mind tillin' me how that same might be done?" asked Tolly Tip, showing considerable interest. "I niver knowed that ye could shoot a bear with a shmall contraption like that black box."

Some of the boys snickered, but Paul frowned on them.

"When we speak that way," he went on to explain, "we mean getting an object in the proper focus, and then clicking the trigger of the camera. We are really just taking a picture."

"Oh! now I say what ye mane," admitted the woodsman; "but I niver owned a camera in all me life, so I'm what ye'd call grane at it. Sure 'tis a harmless way av shootin' anything I should say."

"But it gives a fellow just as much pleasure to get a cracking good picture of a wild animal at home as it does a hunter to kill," Phil Towns hastened to remark. Tolly Tip, however, shook

his head in the negative, as though to declare that for the life of him he could not see it that way.

"If you can show me a place that the black bear is using," Paul continued, "I'll fix my camera in such a way that when Bruin pulls at a bait attached to a cord he'll ignite the flashlight cartridge, and take his own photograph."

At that the woodsman laughed aloud, so novel did the scheme strike him.

"I'll do that same and without delay, me lad," he declared. "I've got a notion this very minute that I know where I might find my bear; and after nightfall I'll bait the ground wid some ould combs av wild honey."

"Wild honey did you say?" asked Jud, licking his lips in anticipation, for if there was one thing to eat in all the wide world Jud liked better than another it was the sweets from the hive.

"Och! 'tis mesilf that has stacks av the same laid away, and I promise ye all ye kin eat while ye stay here," the woodsman told them, at which Jud executed a pigeon-wing to express his satisfaction.

"And did you gather it yourself around here, Tolly Tip?" he inquired.

"Nawthin' else," acknowledged the old trapper. "Ye say, whin Mister Garrity do be staying down in town it's small work I have to do; and to locate a bee tree is a rale pleasure. Some time I'll till

ye how we go about the thrick. Av course there's no use tryin' it afther winter sets in, for the bees stick in the hive."

"And bears just dote on honey, do they, the same as Jud here does?" asked Frank.

"A bear kin smell honey a mile away," the woodsman declared. "In fact, the very last time I glimpsed the ould varmint we've been spakin' about 'twas at the bee tree I'd chopped down. I wint home to sacure some pails, and whin I got back to the spot there the ould beast was a lickin' up the stuff in big gobs. Sure I could have shot him aisy enough, but I had made up me mind to take him in a trap or not at all, so I lit him go."

"So he got his share of the honey, did he?" asked Jud.

"Oh! I lift him all I didn't want, and set a trap to nab him, but by me word he was too smart for Tolly Tip."

"Then I hope you salt the ground to-night," remarked Paul, "and that I can set my camera to-morrow evening and see what comes of it."

It was not long before they were sitting down to the first real game supper of the excursion. Everybody spoke of it as "Bobolink's venison treat," and that individual's boyish heart swelled with pride from time to time until Spider Sexton called out:

"Next thing you know we'll have a real tragedy hereabouts."

"What do you mean?" demanded Phil Towns,

"Why," explained Spider, "Bobolink keeps on swelling out his chest like a pouter pigeon every time somebody happens to mention his deer, and I'm afraid he'll burst with vanity soon."

"And when the day's doings are written up," Bluff put in, "be sure and put in that another of our gallant band came within an ace of being terribly bitten by a savage wild beast."

"Please explain what it's all about," begged Tom. "You see Jack and I were away pretty much all day. You and Sandy went off with Tolly Tip, didn't you, to see how he managed his traps? Was it then the terrible thing happened?"

"It was," said Bluff, with a chuckle. "You see Tolly Tip kept on explaining everything as we went from trap to trap, and both of us learned heaps this morning. Finally, we came to the marsh and there a muskrat trap held a big, ferocious animal by the hind leg."

"You see," Sandy broke in, as though anxious to show off his knowledge of the art of trapping, "as a rule the rat is drowned, which saves the skin from being mangled. But this one stayed up on the bank instead of jumping off when caught in the trap. Now go on, Bluff."

"Sandy accidentally got a mite too close to the beast," continued the other. "First thing I knew I heard a snarl, and then Sandy jumped back, with the teeth of the muskrat clinging to the elbow of his coat sleeve. An inch further and our chum'd have been badly bitten. It was a mighty narrow escape, let me tell you."

"Another thing that would interest you, Paul," Bluff went on to say, "was the beaver house we saw in the pond the animals had made when they built a dam across the creek, a mile above here."

"Beavers around this section too!" exclaimed Jud, as though it almost took his breath away.

"Only wan little colony," explained Tolly Tip.

"I'd give something to get a picture of real, live beavers, at their work," Paul remarked.

"Thin ye'll have till come up this way nixt spring time, whin they do be friskin' around like young lambs," the woodsman told him. "Jist now they do be snug in their winter quarrters, and ye'll not see a speck av thim. If it's the house ye want to take a picture av, the chance is yours any day ye see fit."

After supper was over Jack and Tom took a look at the new bunks.

"A bully job, fellows!" declared the latter, "and one that does you credit. Why, every one of us is now fitted with a coffin. And I see we can

sleep without danger of rolling out, since you've fixed a slat across the front of each bunk."

"Taken as a whole," Frank announced, "I think the scouts have done pretty well for their first day at Camp Garrity. Don't you, fellows? Plenty of fish and venison in the locker, all these bunks built, lots of valuable information picked up, and last but not least, coals of fire poured on the head of the enemy."

They sat around again and talked as the evening advanced, for there was an endless list of interesting things to be considered. Later Paul accompanied the old woodsman on his walk to the place where he believed the bear would pass. Here they set out the honey comb that had been carried along, to serve as an attractive bait.

"Ye understand," explained Tolly Tip, as they wended their way homeward again in the silvery moonlight that made the scene look like fairyland, "that once the ould rascal finds a trate like that he'll come a sniffin' around ivery night for a week av Sundays, hopin' fortune wull be kind till him ag'in."

As the boys were very tired after such a strenuous day, they did not sit up very late.

Every lad slept soundly on this, the second night in camp. In fact, most of them knew not a single thing five minutes after they lay down until the

odor of coffee brought them to their senses to find that it was broad daylight, and that breakfast was well under way.

Paul and Jud left the camp immediately after breakfast intending to go to the place where the honey comb had been left as bait. Tolly Tip, before they went, explained further.

"Most times, ye say, bears go into their winter quarters with the first hard cold spell, and hibernate till spring comes. This s'ason it has been so queer I don't know but what the bear is still at large, because I saw his tracks just the day before ye arrived in camp."

When the pair came back the others met them with eager questions.

"How about it, Paul?"

"Any chance of getting that flashlight?"

"Did you find the honey gone?"

"See any tracks around?"

Paul held up his hand.

"I'll tell you everything in a jiffy, fellows, if you give me half a chance," he said. "Yes, we found that the honeycomb had been carried off; and there in the snow were some pretty big tracks left by Bruin, the bear!"

"Good!" exclaimed Frank Savage, "then he'll be back to-night. It's already settled that you'll coax him to snap off his own picture."

CHAPTER XX

AT THE BEAVER POND

THE second day in camp promised to be very nearly as full of action as that lively first one had been. Every scout had half a dozen things he wanted to do; so, acting on the advice of Paul, each made out a list, and thus followed a regular programme.

Jud, having learned that there were partridges about, set off with his shotgun to see if he could bag a few of the plump birds.

"Don't forget there are ten of us here, Jud!" called Spider Sexton, "and that each one of us can get away with a bird."

"Have a heart, can't you?" remonstrated the Nimrod, laughingly. "Cut it down to half all around, and I might try to oblige you. Think of me, staggering along under such a load of game as that. Guess you never hefted a fat partridge, Spider."

"I admit that I never *ate* one, if that suits you, Jud," replied the other, frankly.

Paul on his part had told Tolly Tip he would like to accompany him on his round of the traps on that particular morning.

"Of course, I've got an object in view when I say that," he explained. "It is to take a look at the beaver house you've been telling me about. I want to take my camera along, and snap off a few views of it. That will be better than nothing when we tell the story."

"Count me in on that trip, Paul," said Spider Sexton. "I always did want to see a regular beaver colony, and learn how they make the dam where their houses are built. I hope you don't object to my joining you?"

"Not a bit. Only too glad to have you for company, Spider," answered the scout-master. "Only both of us are under Tolly Tip's orders, you understand. He has his rules when visiting the traps, which we mustn't break, as that might ruin his chances of taking more pelts."

"How can that be, Paul?" demanded the other.

"Oh! you'll understand better as you go along," called out Bluff, who was close by and heard this talk. "Sandy Griggs and I learned a heap yesterday while helping him gather his harvest of skins. And for one, I'll never forget what he explained to me, it was all so interesting."

"The main thing is this," Paul went on to say,

in order to relieve Spider's intense curiosity to some extent. "You must know all these wild animals are gifted with a marvelous sense of smell, and can readily detect the fact that a human being has been near their haunts."

"Why, I never thought about that before, Paul," admitted Spider; "but I can see how it must be so. I've hunted with a good setter, and know what a dog's scent is."

"Well, a mink or an otter or a fox is gifted even more than the best dog you ever saw," Paul continued, "and on that account it's always up to the trapper to conceal the fact that a human being has been around, because these animals seem to know by instinct that man is their mortal enemy."

"How does he do it then?" asked Spider.

"You'll see by watching Tolly Tip," the scoutmaster told him. "Sometimes trappers set their snares by means of a skiff, so as not to leave a trace of their presence, for water carries no scent. Then again they will wade to and from the place where the trap is set."

"But in the winter-time they couldn't do that, could they?" protested Spider.

"Of course not, and to overcome that obstacle they sometimes use a scent that overpowers their own, as well as serves to draw the animal to the fatal trap."

"Oh! I remember now seeing some such thing advertised in a sporting magazine as worth its weight in gold to all trappers. And the more I hear about this the stronger my desire grows to see into it. Are we going to start soon, Paul?"

"There's Tolly Tip almost ready to move along, so get your gun, and I'll look after my camera, Spider."

At the time they left Camp Garrity it presented quite a bustling picture. There was Bobolink lustily swinging the axe and cutting some wood close by the shed where a winter's supply of fuel had been piled up. Tom Betts was busying himself cleaning some of the fish taken on the preceding day. Jack was hanging out all the blankets on several lines for an airing, as they still smelled of camphor to a disagreeable extent. Several others were moving to and fro engaged in various duties.

As the two scouts trotted along at the heels of the old woodsman they found many things to chat about, for there was no need of keeping silent at this early stage of the hike. Later on when in the vicinity of the trap line it would be necessary to bridle their tongues, or at least to talk in whispers, for the wary little animals would be apt to shun a neighborhood where they heard the sound of human voices.

"One reason I wanted to come out this morning," explained Paul, "was that there seems to be a feeling in the air that spells storm to me. If we had a heavy fall of snow the beaver house might be hidden from view."

"What's that you say, Paul—a storm, when the sun's shining as bright as ever it could? Have you had a wireless from Washington?" demanded Spider, grinning.

"Oh! I seem to *feel* it in my bones," laughed Paul. "Always did affect me that way, somehow or other. And nine times out of ten my barometer tells me truly. How about that, Tolly Tip? Is this fine weather apt to last much longer?"

The guide seemed to be amused at what they were saying.

"Sure and I'm tickled to death to hear ye say that same, Paul," he replied. "By the powers I'm blissed wid the same kind av a barometer in me bones. Yis, and the signs do be tilling me that inside of forty-eight hours, mebbe a deal less nor that, we're due for a screecher. It has been savin' up a long while now, and whin she breaks loose—howly smoke, but we'll git it!"

"Meaning a big storm, eh, Tolly Tip?" asked Spider, looking a bit incredulous.

"Take me worrd for the same, lads," the woodsman told them.

"Well, if your prediction comes true," said Spider, "I must try to find out how to know what sort of weather is coming. I often watch the predictions of the Weather Bureau tacked up at the post office, but lots of times it's away off the track. Bobolink was saying only this morning that he expected we'd skip all the bad weather on this trip."

At mention of Bobolink's name, the trapper chuckled.

" 'Tis a quare chap that same Bobolink sames to be," he observed. "He says such amusin' things at times. Only this same mornin' do ye know he asks me whether I could till him if that short tramp's hand had been hurted by a cut or a burrn. Just as if that mattered to us at all, at all."

Paul did not say anything, but his eyebrows went up as though a sudden thought had struck him. Whatever was in his mind he kept to himself.

When they arrived at the marsh where Tolly Tip had several of his traps set he told his companions what he wanted them to do. Under certain conditions they could approach with him and witness the process of taking out the victim, if fortune had been kind to the trapper. Afterwards they would see how he reset the trap, and then backed away, removing every possible evidence of his presence.

Both scouts were deeply interested, though Spider rather pitied the poor rats they took from the cruel jaws of the Newhouse traps, and inwardly decided that after all he would never like to be a gatherer of pelts.

Later on Tolly Tip led them to the frozen creek, where they picked up a splendid mink and an otter as well. Shrewd and sly though these little wearers of fur coats were, they had not been able to withstand the temptation of the bait the trapper had placed in their haunts, with the result that they paid the penalty of their greed with their lives.

Finally the trio reached the pond where the beaver lived. It was, of course, ice covered, but the conical mound in the middle interested the boys very much. Paul took several pictures of it, with his two companions standing in the foreground, as positive evidence that the scouts had been on the spot.

They also examined the strong dam which the cunning animals had constructed across the creek, so as to hold a certain depth of water. When the boys saw the girth of the trees the sharp teeth of the beavers had cut into lengths in order to form the dam, the scouts were amazed.

"I'd give a lot to see them at work," declared Paul. "If I get half a chance, Tolly Tip, I'm

going to come up here next spring if you'll send me word when they're on the job. It would be well worth the trip on horseback from Stanhope."

Upon arriving at the camp toward noon the boys and their guide found everything running smoothly, and a great deal accomplished. Jud had not come back as yet, but several times distant shots had been heard, and the boys were indulging in high hopes of what Jud would bring back.

"You musn't forget though," Paul warned these optimists, "that we're not the only pebbles on the beach. There are others in these woods, some of them with guns, and no mean hunters at that."

"Meaning the Lawson crowd," remarked Bobolink. "Your statement is quite true, for I've seen Hank do some mighty fine shooting in times past. He likes nothing so much as to wander around day after day in the fall, with a gun in his hands, just as old Rip Van Winkle used to do."

"Yes," remarked Jack, drily, "a gun in hand has served as an excuse for a *loaf* in more ways than getting the family bread."

"Hey!" cried Bluff, "there comes Jud right now. And look what he's got, will you?"

CHAPTER XXI

SETTING THE FLASHLIGHT TRAP

"JUD'S holding up one measly rabbit, as sure as anything!" exclaimed Bobolink, with a vein of scorn in his voice, as became the lord of the hunt, who on the preceding day had actually brought down a young buck, and thus provided the camp with a feast for supper.

"We'd soon starve to death if we had to depend on poor old Jud for our grub!" remarked Tom Betts, with a sad shake of his head.

"All that waste of ammunition, and just a lone rabbit to show for it! They say successful hunters must be born, not made!" Sandy Griggs went on to say.

Other sarcastic remarks went the rounds, while Jud just stood meekly, seeming to be very much downcast.

"Are you all through?" he finally asked, looking up with a grin. "Because before you condemn me entirely as a poor stick of a hunter I want to ask Bobolink here, and Spider Sexton to walk

over to that low oak tree you can see back yonder, and fetch in what they find in the fork. I caved on the home stretch and dropped my load there."

"Good for you, Jud!" exclaimed Paul. "I suspected something of the kind when I saw the soiled condition of the game pockets in your hunting-coat, and noticed that a partridge feather was sticking to your hair. Skip along, you two, and make amends for joshing Jud so."

Of course Bobolink and Spider fairly ran, and soon came back carrying seven plump partridges between them, at sight of which a great cheer arose. Like all fickle crowds, the boys now applauded Jud just as strongly as they had previously sought to poke fun at him.

"Oh! I don't deserve much credit, boys," he told them. "These birds just tree after you scare them up, and make easy shots. If they flew off like bullets, as they do in some parts of the country, that would be a bag worth boasting of. But they'll taste mighty fine, all the same, let me tell you!"

During the afternoon the scouts found many things to interest them. Tolly Tip, of course, had to take care of the pelts he had secured that day, and his manner of doing this interested some of the boys considerably.

He had a great many thin boards of peculiar

pattern to which the skins were to be attached after stretching, so that they would dry in this shape.

"Most skins ye notice are cut open an' cured that way," the old woodsman explained to his audience, as he worked deftly with his knife; "but some kinds are cased, bein' taken off whole, and turned inside out to dry."

"I suppose you lay them near the fire, or out in the sun, to cure," remarked Tom Betts. "I know that's the way the Indians dry the pemmican that they use in the winter for food."

"Pelts are niver cured that way," explained the trapper, "because it'd make thim shrink. We kape the stretcher boards wid the skins out in the open air, but in the shade where the sun don't come. Whin they git to a certain stage it's proper to stack the same away in the cabin, kapin' a wary eye on 'em right along to prevint mould."

All such things proved of considerable interest to the scouts, most of whom had very little practical knowledge along these lines. They were eager to pick up useful information wherever it could be found, and on that account asked numerous questions, all of which Tolly Tip seemed delighted to answer.

So another nightfall found them, with everything moving along nicely.

"Guess your old barometer didn't hit it far wrong after all, Paul," remarked Sandy Griggs, about the time supper was nearly ready, and the boys were going in and out of the cabin on different errands.

"It has clouded up to be sure," said the scout-master, "and may snow at any time, though I hope it will hold off until to-morrow. I mean to set my camera trap to-night, you remember, with another comb of wild bee honey for a bear lure."

"I heard Tolly Tip saying a bit ago," continued Sandy, "that he didn't believe the storm would reach us for twelve hours or more. That would give you plenty of time to get your chance with old Bruin, who loves honey so."

"Jud's promised to go out with me and help set the trap," Paul remarked. "You know it's a walk of nearly a mile to the place, and these snowy woods are pretty lonely after the dark sets in."

"If Jud backs out because he's tired from his tramp this morning, Paul, call on me, will you?"

"Bobolink said the same thing," laughed the scout-master, "so I'm sure not to be left in the lurch. No need of more than one going with me though, and I guess I can count on Jud. It's hard to tire him."

"Wow! but those birds do smell good!" ex-

claimed Sandy, as he sniffed the air. "And that oven of Tolly Tip's, in which he says he often bakes bread, seems to do the work all right. Looks to me like one of the kind you get with a blue flame kerosene stove."

"Just what it is," Paul told him. "But it works splendidly on a red coal fire, too. We're going to try some baking-powder biscuits to-morrow, Bobolink says. He's tickled over finding the oven here."

The partridges were done to a turn, and never had those hungry boys sat down to a better feast than several of their number had prepared for them that night. The old woodsman complimented Bobolink, who was the chief cook.

"I ralely thought I could cook," Tolly Tip said, "but 'tis mesilf as takes a back sate whin such a connysure is around. And biscuits is it ye mane to thry in the mornin'? I'll make it a pint to hang around long enough to take lissons, for I confiss that up till now I niver did have much success with thim things."

Again some of the scouts had to warn Bobolink that he was in jeopardy of his life if he allowed his chest to swell up, as it seemed to be doing under such compliments.

After that wonderful supper had been disposed of, Paul busied himself with his camera, for he

had several things to fix before it would be ready to serve as a trap to catch the picture of Bruin in the act of stealing the honey bait.

Jud fondled his shotgun, having thoughtfully replaced the bird shells with a couple of shells containing buckshot that he had brought along in the hope of getting a deer.

"No telling what we may run across when trapsing through the woods with a lantern after nightfall," he explained to Phil Towns, who was watching his operation with mild interest, not being a hunter himself.

"What would you do if you came face to face with the bear, or perhaps a panther?" asked Phil. "Tolly Tip said he saw one of the big cats last winter."

"Well, now, that's hardly a fair question," laughed Jud. "I'm too modest a fellow to go around blowing my own horn; but the chances are I wouldn't *run*. And if both barrels of my gun went off the plagued beast might stand in the way of getting hurt. Figure that out if you can, Phil."

After a little while Paul arose to his feet and proceeded to light the lantern they had provided for the outing.

"I'm ready if you are, Jud," he remarked, and shortly afterwards the two left the cabin, Tolly Tip once more repeating the plain directions, so

that there need be no fear that the boys would get lost in the snowy woods.

Paul was too wise a woodsman to be careless, and he took Jud directly to the spot which the bear had visited the preceding night.

"Don't see anything of the creature around, do you?" asked Jud, nervously handling his gun as he spoke.

"Not a sign as yet," replied Paul. "But the chances are he'll remember the treat he found here last night, and come trotting along before many hours. That's what Tolly Tip told me, and he ought to know."

"Strikes me a bear is a pretty simple sort of an animal after all," chuckled Jud. "He must think that honey rains down somehow, and never questions but that he'll find more where the first comb lay. Tell me what to do, Paul, and I'll be only too glad to help you."

The camera was presently fixed just where Paul had decided on his previous visit would be the best place. Long experience had taught the lad just how to arrange it so that the animal of which he wished to get a flashlight picture would be compelled to approach along a certain avenue.

When it attempted to take the bait the cord would be pulled, and the cartridge exploded, producing the flash required to take the picture.

"There!" he said finally, after working for at least fifteen minutes, "everything is arranged to a dot, and we can start back home. If Mr. Bear comes nosing around here to-night, and starts to get that honeycomb, I reckon he'll hand me over something in return in the shape of a photograph."

"Here's hoping you'll get the best picture ever, Paul!" said Jud, earnestly, for he had been deeply impressed with the clever manner in which the photographer went about his duties.

They had gone almost a third of the way over the back trail when a thrilling sound came to their ears almost directly in the path they were following. Both boys came to a sudden halt, and as Jud started to raise his gun he exclaimed:

"Unless I miss my guess, Paul, that was one of the bobcats Tolly Tip told us about."

CHAPTER XXII

WAYLAID IN THE TIMBER

"STAND perfectly still, Jud," cried Paul, hastily, fearful that his impulsive companion might be tempted to do something careless.

"But if he starts to jump at us I ought to try to riddle him, Paul, don't you think?" pleaded the other, as he drew both hammers of his gun back.

Paul carried a camp hatchet, which he had made use of to fashion the approach to the trap. This he drew back menacingly, while gripping the lantern in his left hand.

"Of course, you can, if it comes to a fight, Jud," he answered, "but the cat may not mean to attack us after all. They're most vicious when they have young kits near by, and this isn't the time of year for that."

"Huh! Tolly Tip told me there was an unusual lot of these fellows around here this season, and mighty bold at that," Jud remarked, drily, as he searched the vicinity for some sign of a creeping form at which he could fire.

"Yes, I suppose the early coming of winter has made them extra hungry," admitted the scoutmaster; "though there seems to be plenty of game for them to catch in the way of rabbits, partridges and gray squirrels."

"Well, do we go on again, Paul, or are you thinking of camping here for the rest of the night?" demanded Jud, impatiently.

"Oh! we'll keep moving toward the home camp," Jud was informed. "But watch out every second of the time. That chap may be lying in a crotch of a tree, meaning to drop down on us."

A minute later, as they were moving slowly and cautiously along, Jud gave utterance to a low hiss.

"I see the rascal, Paul!" he said excitedly.

"Wait a bit, Jud," urged the other. "Don't shoot without being dead sure. A wounded bobcat is nothing to be laughed at, and we may get some beauty scratches before we can finish him. Tell me where you've glimpsed the beast."

"Look up to where I'm pointing with my gun, Paul, and you can see two yellow balls shining like phosphorus. Those are his eyes and if I aim right between them I'm bound to finish him."

Jud had hardly said this when there came a loud hoot, and the sound of winnowing wings reached them. At the same time the glowing, yellow spots suddenly vanished.

"Wow! what do you think of that for a fake?" growled Jud in disgust. "It was only an old owl after all, staring down at us. But say, Paul! that screech didn't come from him let me tell you; there's a cat around here somewhere."

As if to prove Jud spoke the truth there came just then another vicious snarl.

"Holy smoke! Paul, did you hear that?" ejaculated Jud, half turning. "Comes from behind us now, and I really believe there must be a pair of the creatures stalking us on the way home!"

"They usually hunt in couples," affirmed Paul, not showing any signs of alarm, though he clutched the hatchet a little more firmly in his right hand, and turned his head quickly from side to side, as though desirous of covering all the territory possible.

"Would it pay us to move around in a half circle, and let them keep the old path?" asked Jud, who could stand for one wildcat, but drew the line at a wholesale supply.

"I don't believe it would make any difference," returned the scout-master. "If they're bent on giving us trouble any sign of weakness on our part would only encourage them."

"What shall we do then?"

"Move right along and pay attention to our business," replied Paul. "If we find that we've

got to fight, try to make sure of one cat when you fire. The second rascal we may have to tackle with hatchet and clubbed gun. Now walk ahead of me, so the light won't dazzle your eyes when I swing the lantern."

The two scouts moved along slowly, always on the alert. Paul kept the light going back and forth constantly, hoping that it might impress the bold bobcats with a sense of caution. Most wild animals are afraid of fire, and as a rule there is no better protection for the pedestrian when passing through the lonely woods than to have a blazing torch in his hand, with lusty lungs to shout occasionally.

"Hold on!" exclaimed Jud, after a short time had elapsed.

"What do you see now, another owl?" asked Paul, trying to make light of the situation, though truth to tell he felt a bit nervous.

"This isn't any old owl, Paul," asserted the boy with the gun. "Besides the glaring eyes, I can see his body on that limb we must pass under. Look yourself and tell me if that isn't his tail twitching back and forth?"

"Just what it is, Jud. I've seen our tabby cat do that when crouching to spring on a sparrow. The beast is ready to jump as soon as we come within range. Are you covering him, Jud?"

"Dead center. Trust me to damage his hide for him. Shall I shoot?"

"Use only one barrel, mind, Jud. You may need the other later on. Now, if you're all ready, let go!"

There was a loud bang as Jud pulled the trigger. Mingled with the report was a shrill scream of agony. Then something came flying through the air from an entirely different quarter.

"Look out! The second cat!" velled Paul, striking savagely with his hatchet, which struck against a flying body, and hurled it backward in a heap.

The furious wildcat instantly recovered, and again assailed the two boys standing on the defensive. Jud had clubbed his gun, for at such close quarters he did not think he could shoot with any degree of accuracy.

Indeed, for some little time that beast kept both of them on the alert, and more than once sharp claws came in contact with the tough khaki garments worn by the scouts.

After a third furious onslaught which ended in the cat's being knocked over by a lucky stroke from Jud's gunstock, the animal seemed to conclude that the combat was too unequal. That last blow must have partly tamed its fiery spirit, for it jumped back out of sight, though they could still hear its savage snarling from some point near by.

Both lads were panting for breath. At the same time they felt flushed with victory. It was not every scout who could meet with such an adventure as this when in the snowy forest, and come out of it with credit.

"If he only lets me get a glimpse of his old hide," ventured Jud, grimly, "I'll riddle it for him, let me tell you! But say! I hope you don't mean to evacuate this gory battle-ground without taking a look to see whether I dropped that other beast or not?"

"Of course not, Jud! I'm a little curious myself to see whether your aim was as good as you believe. Let's move over that way, always keeping ready to repel boarders, remember. That second cat may get his wind, and come for us again."

"I hope he will, that's what!" said Jud, whose fighting blood was now up. "I dare him to tackle us again. Nothing would please me better, Paul."

A dozen paces took them to the vicinity of the tree in which Jud had sighted the crouching beast at which he had fired.

"Got him, all right, Paul!" he hastened to call out, with a vein of triumph in his excited voice. "He fell in a heap, and considering that there were twelve buckshot in that shell, and every one hit him, it isn't to be wondered at."

"A pretty big bobcat in the bargain, Jud, and

well worth boasting over. Look at his long claws, and the sharp teeth back of those short lips. An ugly customer let me tell you. I'm glad we didn't have him on our shoulders, that's all."

"I'm bound to drag the creature all the way to the cabin, to show the boys," announced the successful marksman. "Now don't say anything against it, Paul. You see I'll hold my gun under my arm ready, and at the first sign of trouble I'll let go of the game and be ready to shoot."

"That's all right, Jud, you're entitled to your trophy, though the skin is pretty well riddled with that big hole through it. Still, Tolly Tip may be able to cure it so as to make a mat for your den at home. Let's be moving."

They could still hear that low and ominous growling and snarling. Sometimes it came from one side, and then again switched around to the other, as the angry cat tried to find an avenue that would appear to be undefended.

Every step of the way home they felt they were being watched by a pair of fiery eyes. Not for a second did either of the boys dream of abating their vigilance, for the sagacity of the wildcat would enable him to know when to make the attack.

Indeed, several times Jud dropped his trailing burden and half raised his gun, as he imagined he

detected a suspicious movement somewhere close by. They proved to be false alarms, however, and nothing occurred on the way home to disturb them.

When not far from the cabin they heard loud voices, and caught the flicker of several blazing torches amidst the trees.

"It's Tolly Tip and the boys," announced Paul, as soon as he caught the sounds and saw the moving lights. "They must have heard the gunshot and our shouts, and are coming this way to find out what's the trouble."

A few minutes later they saw half a dozen hurrying figures approaching, several carrying guns. As the anxious ones discovered Paul and Jud they sent out a series of whoops which the returning scouts answered. And when those who had come from the cabin saw the dead bobcat, as well as listened to the story of the attack, they were loud in their praises of the valor of the adventurous pair.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE BLIZZARD

"WHEW! but it's bitter cold this morning!" shouted Sandy Griggs, as he opened the cabin door and thrust his head out.

"Looks like a few flakes of snow shooting past, in the bargain," added Bobolink. "That means that the long expected storm is upon us."

Paul turned to Jack at hearing this, for both of them were hurriedly dressing after crawling out of their comfortable bunks.

"A little snow isn't going to make us hedge on that arrangement we made the last thing before turning in, I hope, Jack?" he asked, smilingly.

"I should say not!" came the prompt reply. "Besides, if it's going to put a foot or two of the feathery on the ground, it strikes me you've just got to get that expensive camera of yours again. I'm with you, Paul, right after breakfast."

Tolly Tip was also in somewhat of a hurry, wishing to make the round of his line of traps before the storm fully set in.

So it came about that Paul and his closest chum, after a cup of hot coffee and a meagre breakfast, hurried away from the cabin.

"We can get another batch when we come back, if they save any for us, you know," the scout-master remarked, as they opened the door and passed out.

"Kape your bearin's, lads," called the old woodsman. "If so be the storm comes along with a boom it'll puzzle ye to be sure av yer way. And by the same token, to be adrift in thim woods with a howler blowin' for thray days isn't any fun."

When the scouts once got started they found that the air was particularly keen. Both of them were glad they had taken the precaution to cover up their ears, and wear their warmest mittens.

"Something seems to tell me we're in for a regular blizzard this time," Jack remarked as they trudged manfully along, at times bowing their heads to the bitter wind that seemed to cut like a knife.

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised if that turned out to be true," Paul contented himself with saying.

They did not exchange many words while breasting the gale, for it was the part of wisdom to keep their mouths closed as much as possible.

Paul had taken note of the way to the spot where the camera trap had been set in the hope of catching Bruin in the act of taking the sweet bait.

A number of times he turned around and looked back. This was because he had accustomed himself to viewing his surroundings at various angles, which is a wise thing for a scout to do. Then when he tries to retrace his steps he will not find himself looking at a reverse picture that seems unfamiliar in his eyes.

In the course of time the boys arrived at their destination.

"Don't see anything upset around here," observed Paul, with a shade of growing disappointment in his voice; and then almost instantly adding in excitement: "But the bait's gone, all right—and yes! the cartridge has been fired. Good enough!"

"Here you can see faint signs of the tracks of the bear under this new coating of snow!" declared Jack, pointing down at his feet.

Paul, knowing that he would not go for his camera until after broad daylight, had managed to so arrange it, with a clever attachment of his own construction, that an exposure was made just at the second the cord firing the flashlight was drawn taut.

It was a time exposure—the shutter remaining

open for a score of seconds before automatically closing again. This was arranged so that pictures could be taken on moonlight nights as well as dark ones. He had tried it on several previous occasions, and with very good results.

Brushing the accumulated snow from his camera, he quickly had the precious article in his possession.

"Nothing else to keep us here, is there, Paul?" asked Jud.

"No, and the sooner we strike a warm gait for the cabin the better," said the scout-master. "You notice, if anything, that wind is getting sharper right along, and the snow strikes you on the cheek like shot pellets, stinging furiously. So far as I'm concerned we can't make the camp any too soon."

Nevertheless, it might have been noticed that Paul did not hurry, in the sense that he forgot to keep his wits about him. The warning given by Tolly Tip was still fresh in his ears, and even without it Paul would hardly have allowed himself to become indiscreet or careless.

Jack, too, saw that they were following the exact line they had taken in coming out. As a scout he knew that the other did not get his bearings from any marks on the ground, such as might easily be obliterated by falling snow. Trees formed the

basis of Paul's calculations. He particularly noticed every peculiarly shaped tree or growth upon the right side while going out, which would bring them on his left in returning.

In this fashion the scout-master virtually blazed a path as he went; for those trees gave him his points just as well as though they represented so many gashes made with a hatchet.

"I'm fairly wild to develop this film, and see see whether the bear paid for his treat with a good picture," Paul ventured to say when they were about half way to the camp.

"Do you know what I was thinking about just then?" asked Jack.

"Something that had to do with other fellows, I'll be bound," replied the scout-master. "You were looking mighty serious, and I'd wager a cookey that you just remembered there were other fellows up here to be caught in the blizzard besides our crowd."

Jack laughed at hearing this.

"You certainly seem to be a wizard, Paul, to guess what was in my mind," he told his chum. "But it's just as you say. Sim Jeffreys told us the other day that they had come up with only a small amount of food along. If they've stayed around up to now they're apt to find themselves in a pretty bad pickle."

"That's a fact, Jack, if this storm keeps on for several days, and the snow happens to block all the paths out of the woods. Let's hope they gave it up, and went back home again. We haven't seen a thing of them since then, you remember."

Jack shook his head.

"You know how pig-headed Hank Lawson always is," he told his chum. "Once he gets started in a thing, he hates everlastingly to give up. He came here to bother us, I feel sure, and a little thing like a shortage of provisions wouldn't force him to call the game off."

"Then it's your opinion, is it, Jack, they're still in that hole among the rocks Sim spoke of?"

"Chances are three to one it's that way," quickly replied Jack. "They have guns, and could get some game that way, for they know how to hunt. Then if it came to the worst perhaps Hank would try to sneak around our cabin, hoping to find a chance to steal some of our supplies."

A short time later they sighted the cabin through the now thickly falling snow, and both boys felt very glad to be able to get under shelter.

Tolly Tip did not return until some hours had passed. By that time the snow carried by a furious wind that howled madly around the corners, was sweeping past the windows of the cabin like a cloud of dust.

Everybody was glad when the old woodsman arrived. He flung several prizes down on the floor, not having taken the time to detach the pelts.

"'Tis a screecher av a blizzard we're after havin' drop in on us, by the same token," he said, with quivering lips, as he stretched out his hands toward the cheerful blaze of the fire.

Being very eager to ascertain what measure of success had fallen to him with regard to the bear episode, Paul proceeded to develop the film.

When he rejoined the other boys in the front room some time later he was holding up the developed film, still dripping with water.

"The best flashlight I ever got, let me tell you!" Paul exclaimed. At this there was a cheer and a rush to see the film.

There was the bear, looking very much astonished at the sudden brilliant illumination which must have seemed like a flash of lightning to him.

All day long the storm howled, the snow drifted and scurried around the cabin. Whenever the boys went for wood they had to be very careful lest they lose their way even in such a short distance, for it was impossible to see five feet ahead. When they went to bed that night the same conditions held good, and every one felt that they were in the grip of the greatest blizzard known for ten years.

CHAPTER XXIV

THE DUTY OF THE SCOUT

When two days had passed and the storm still raged, the scouts began to feel more anxious than ever. The snow continued to sweep past the cabin in blinding sheets. It was difficult to know whether all this came from above, or if some was snatched up from the ground and whirled about afresh.

In some places enormous drifts abounded, while other more exposed spots had been actually swept bare by the wind.

The scouts had not suffered in the least, save mentally. The cabin proved to be fairly warm, thanks to the great fire they kept going day and night; and they certainly had no reason to fear for any lack of provisions with which to satisfy their ever present appetites.

Still, from time to time, murmurs could be heard.

"One thing sure!" Sandy Griggs was saying toward noon on this third day of the blizzard, "this storm is going to upset a whole lot of our plans."

"Knock 'em into a jiffy!" added Bluff.

"We'll never be able to skate down the creek to the lake, if it's covered with two feet of snow," Sandy growled.

"Oh! for all we know," laughed Paul, "this wind has been a good friend to us, and may keep the smooth ice clear of snow. We'd better not cry until we know the milk has really been spilled."

"But any way," Bluff continued, bound to find some cause for the gloomy feelings that clung like a wet blanket, "we'll never be able to run our ice-boats back home. Chances are we'll have to drag them most of the way."

"All right, then," Paul told him, "we'll make the best of a bad bargain. If you only look hard enough, Bluff and Sandy, you'll find the silver lining to every cloud. And no matter how the storm upsets some of our plans we ought to be thankful we've got such a snug shelter, and plenty of good things to eat—thanks to Mr. Garrity."

"Yes, that's what I just had in mind, Paul," spoke up Bobolink. "Now, you all needn't begin to grin at me when I say that. I was thinking more about the fellows who may be shivering and hungry, than of our own well-fed crowd."

"Oh! The Lawsons!" exclaimed Bluff. "That's a fact. While we're having such a royal time of it here they may be up against it good and hard."

Perhaps all of the boys had from time to time allowed their thoughts to stray away, and mental pictures of the Lawson crowd suffering from hunger and cold intruded upon their minds. They forgot whatever they chanced to be doing at that moment, and came around Paul.

"In one way it would serve them right if they did get a little rough experience," observed Spider Sexton, who perhaps had suffered more at the hands of the Stanhope bully and his set than any of the other scouts.

"Oh, that sort of remark hardly becomes you, Spider," Paul reminded him. "If you remember some of the rules and regulations to which you subscribed when joining the organization you'll find that scouts have no business to feel bitter toward any one, especially when the fellows they look on as enemies may be suffering."

"Excuse me, Paul, I guess I spoke without thinking," said Spider, with due humility. "And to prove it I'm going to suggest that we figure out some way we might be of help to Hank and his lot."

"That's more like it, Spider!" the scout-master exclaimed, as though pleased. "None of us fancy those fellows, because so far we've failed to make any impression on them. Several times we've tried to make an advance, but they jeered at us, and

seemed to think it was only fear on our part that made us try to throw a bridge across the chasm separating us. It's going to be different if, as we half believe, they're in serious trouble."

"But Paul, what could we do to help them?" demanded Bluff.

"With this storm raging to beat the band," added Tom Betts, "it would be as much as our lives were worth to venture out. Why, you can't see ten feet away; and we'd be going around in a circle until the cold got us in the end."

"Hold on, fellows, don't jump at conclusions so fast," Paul warned them. "I'd be the last one to advise going out into the woods with the storm keeping up. But Tolly Tip told me the snow stopped hours ago. What we see whirling around is only swept by the wind, for it's as dry as powder you know. And even the wind seems to be dying down now, and is blowing in spasms."

"Paul, you're right, as you nearly always are," Jack affirmed, after he had pressed his nose against the cold glass of the little window. "And say! will you believe me when I say that I can see a small patch of blue sky up yonder—big enough to make a Dutchmen's pair of breeches?"

"Hurrah! that settles the old blizzard then!" cried Sandy Griggs. "You all remember, don't you, the old saying, 'between eleven and two it'll

tell you what it's going to do?' I've seen it work out lots of times."

"Yes," retorted Jud, "and fail as often in the bargain. That's one of the exploded signs. When they come out right you believe in 'em, and when they miss, why you just forget all about it, and go on hoping. But in this case I reckon the old storm must have blown itself about out, and we can look for a week of cold, clear weather now."

"We'll wait until after lunch," said Paul, in his decided fashion that the boys knew so well; "then, if things brighten up, we'll see what we can do. Those fellows must be suffering, more or less, and it's our duty to help them, no matter whether they bother to thank us or not."

"Scouts don't want thanks when they do their duty," said Phil Towns, grandly. "But I suppose you'll hardly pick me out as one of the rescue party, Paul?"

"I'd rather have the hardiest fellows along with me, Phil," replied the scout-master, kindly; "though I'm glad to know you feel willing to serve. It counts just as much to *want* to go, as to be allowed to be one of the number."

Bobolink especially showed great delight over the possibility of their setting out to relieve the enemy in distress. A dozen times he went to the door and passed out, under the plea that they

might as well have plenty of wood in the cabin; but on every occasion upon his return he would report the progress of the clearing skies.

"Have the sun shining right away now, boys," he finally announced, with a beaming face. "And the wind's letting up, more or less. Times are when you can see as far as a hundred feet. And say! it's a wonderful sight let me tell you."

Noon came and they sat down to the lunch that had been prepared for them, this time by Frank and Spider, Bobolink having begged off. The sun was shining in a dazzling way upon the white-coated ground. It looked like fairyland the boys declared, though but little of the snow had remained on the oaks, beeches and other forest trees, owing to the furious and persistent wind.

The hemlocks, however, were bending low with the weight that pressed upon their branches. Some of the smaller ones looked like snow pyramids, and it was plain to be seen that during the remainder of the winter most of this snow was bound to hang on.

"If we only had a few pairs of snow-shoes like Tolly Tip's here," suggested Bobolink, enthusiastically, "we might skim along over ten-foot drifts, and never bother about things."

"Yes," Jud told him, a bit sarcastically, "if we knew just how to manage the bally things, we

might. But it isn't so easy as you think. Most of us would soon be taking headers, and finding ourselves upside down. It's a trick that has to be learned; and some fellows never can get the hang, I've been told."

"Well, there's no need of our talking about it," interposed Paul, "because there's only one pair of snow-shoes in the cabin, and all of us can't wear those. But Tolly Tip says we're apt to find avenues swept in the snow by the wind, where we can walk for the most part on clear ground, with but few drifts to wade through."

"It may make a longer journey av the same," the old woodsman explained; "but if luck favors us we'll git there in due time, I belave, if so be ye settle on goin'."

Nothing could hold the scouts back, it seemed. This idea of setting forth to succor an enemy in distress had taken a firm hold upon their imaginations.

Besides, those days when they were shut up in the storm-besieged cabin had been fearfully long to their active spirits, and on this account, too, they welcomed the chance to do something.

There could no longer be any doubt that the storm had blown itself out, for the sky was rapidly clearing. The air remained bitter cold, and Paul advised those whom he selected to accompany

him to wrap themselves up with additional care, for he did not wish to have them take the chance of frosting their toes and their noses.

Those who were fortunate enough to be drafted for the trip were Jack, Jud, Bobolink and Tom Betts. Some of the others felt slighted, but tried to be as cheerful over their disappointment as possible.

Of course, Tolly Tip was to accompany them, for he would not have allowed the boys to set out without his guidance, under such changed and really hazardous conditions. A trained woodsman would be necessary in order to insure the boys against possible disaster in the storm-bound forest.

Well bundled up, and bearing packs on their backs consisting in the main of provisions, the six started off, followed by the cheers and good wishes of their comrades, and were soon lost to view amidst the white aisles of the forest.

CHAPTER XXV

AMONG THE SNOWDRIFTS

"THIS is hard work after all, let me own up!" announced Jud Elderkin, after they had been pushing on for nearly half an hour.

"To tell you the truth," admitted Tom Betts, "we've turned this way and that so often now I don't know whether we're heading straight."

"Trust Tolly Tip for that," urged Paul. "And besides, if you'd taken your bearings as you should have done when starting, you could tell from the position of the sun that right now we're going straight toward that far-off hill."

"Good for ye, Paul!" commented the guide, who was deeply interested in finding out just how much woods lore these scouts had picked up during their many camp experiences.

"Well, here's where we're up against it good and hard," observed Bobolink.

The clear space they had been following came to an abrupt end, and before them lay a great drift of snow, at least five or six feet deep.

"Do we try to flounder through this, or turn around and try another way?" asked Jud, looking as though, if the decision rested with him, he would only too gladly attack the heap of snow.

Before deciding, Tolly Tip climbed into the fork of a tree. From this point of vantage he was able to see beyond the drift. He dropped down presently with a grin on his face.

"It's clear ag'in beyant the hape av snow; so we'd better try to butt through the same," he told them. "Let me go first, and start a path. Whin I play out one av the rist av ye may take the lead. Come along, boys."

The relief party plunged into the great drift with merry shouts, being filled with the enthusiasm of abounding youth. The big woodsman kept on until even he began to tire of the work; or else guessed that Jud was eager to take his place.

In time they had passed beyond the obstacle, and again found themselves traversing a wind-swept avenue that led in the general direction they wished to go.

A short time afterwards Jud uttered a shout.

"Hold on a minute, fellows!" he called out.

"What ails you now, Jud—got a cramp in your leg, or do you think it's time we stopped for a bite of lunch?" demanded Bobolink.

"Here's the plain track of a deer," answered

Jud, pointing down as he spoke. "And it was made only a short time ago you can see, because while the wind blows the snow some every little while, it hasn't filled the track."

"That's good scout logic, Jud," affirmed Paul; and even the old woodsman nodded his head as though he liked to hear the boy think things out so cleverly.

"Here it turns into this blind path," continued Jud, "which I'd like to wager ends before long in a big drift. Like as not if we chose to follow, we'd find Mr. Stag wallowing in the deepest kind of snow, and making an easy mark."

"Well, we can't turn aside just now, to hunt a poor deer that is having a hard enough time of it keeping life in his body," said Tom Betts, aggressively.

"No, we'll let the poor beast have his chance to get away," said the scout-master. "We've started out on a definite errand, and mustn't allow ourselves to be drawn aside. So put your best foot forward again, Jud."

Jud looked a little loth to give up the chance to get the deer, a thing he had really set his mind on. However, there would still be plenty of time to accomplish this, and equal Bobolink's feat, whereby the other had been able to procure fresh venison for the camp.

"How far along do you think we are, Tolly Tip?" asked Tom Betts, after more time had passed, and they began to feel the result of their struggle.

"More'n half way there, I'd be sayin'," the other replied. "Though it do same as if the drifts might be gittin' heavier the closer we draw to the hill. Av ye fale tired mebbe we'd better rist up a bit."

"What, me tired!" exclaimed Tom, disdainfully, at the same time putting new life in his movements. "Why, I've hardly begun to get started so far. Huh! I'm good for all day at this sort of work, I'm so fond of ploughing through the snow."

The forest seemed very solemn and silent. Doubtless nearly all of the little woods folk found themselves buried under the heavy fall of snow, and it would take time for them to tunnel out.

"Listen to the crows cawing as they fly overhead," said Jud, presently.

"They're gathering in a big flock over there somewhere," remarked Paul.

"They're having what they call a crow caucus," explained Jack. "They do say that the birds carry on in the queerest way, just as if they were holding court to try one of their number that had done something criminal."

"More likely they're getting together to figure it out where they can find the next meal," suggested Bobolink, sensibly. "This snow must have covered up pretty nearly everything. But at the worst they can emigrate to the South—can get to Virginia, where the climate isn't so severe."

As they pushed their way onward the boys indulged in other discussions along such lines as this. They were wideawake, and observed every little thing that occurred around them, and as these often pertained to the science of woodcraft which they delighted to study, they found many opportunities to give forth their opinions.

"We ought to be getting pretty near that old hill, seems to me," observed Tom, when another hour had dragged by. Then he quickly added: "Not that I care much, you know, only the sooner we see if Hank and his cronies are in want the better it'll be."

"There it is right now, dead ahead of us!" exclaimed Jud, who had a pair of wonderfully keen eyes.

Through an opening among the trees they could all see the hill beyond, although it was so covered with snow that its outlines seemed shadowy, and it was little wonder none of them had noticed it before.

"Not more'n a quarter of a mile off, I should

say," declared Tom Betts, unable to hide fully the sense of pleasure the discovery gave him.

"But all the same we'll have a pretty tough time making it," remarked Jud. "It strikes me the snow is deeper right here than in any place yet, and the paths fewer in number."

"How is that, Tolly Tip?" asked Bobolink.

"Ye say, the hill shunted off some av the wind," explained the other without any hesitation; "and so the snow could drop to the ground without bein' blown about so wild like. 'Tis a fine blanket lies ahead av us, and we'll have to do some harrd wadin' to make our way through the same."

"Hit her up!" cried Tom, valiantly. "Who cares for such a little thing as snow piles?"

They floundered along as best they could. It turned out to be anything but child's play, and tested their muscular abilities from time to time.

In vain they looked about them as they drew near the hill; there was not a single trace of any one moving around. Some of the scouts began to feel very queerly as they stared furtively at the snow covered elevation. It reminded them of a white tomb, for somewhere underneath it they feared the four boys from Stanhope might be buried, too weak to dig their way out.

Tolly Tip led them on with unerring fidelity.

"How does it come, Tolly Tip," asked the cu-

rious Jud as they toiled onward, "that you remember this hole in the rocks so well?"

"That's an aisy question to answer," replied the other, with one of his smiles. "Sure 'twas some years ago that I do be having a nate little ruction with the only bear I iver kilt in this section. He was a rouser in the bargain, I'd be after tillin' ye. I had crawled into the rift in the rocks to say where it lid whin I found mesilf up aginst it."

"Oh! in that case I can see that you would be apt to remember the hole in the rocks always," commented Jud. "A fellow is apt to see that kind of thing many a time in his dreams. So those fellows happened on the old bear den, did they?"

"We're clost up to the same now, I'm plazed to till ye," announced the guide. "If ye cast an eye beyont ye'll mebbe notice that spur av rock that stands out like a ploughshare. Jist behind the same we'll strike the crack in the rocks, and like as not find it filled to the brim wid the snow."

When the five scouts and their guide stood alongside the spur of rock, looking down into the cavity now hidden by ten feet of snow, they were somehow forced to turn uneasy faces toward one another. It was deathly still there, and not a sign could they see to indicate that under the shroud of snow the four Stanhope boys might be imprisoned, almost dead with cold and hunger.

CHAPTER XXVI

DUG OUT

THE boys realized that they had heavy work before them if they hoped to dig a way down through that mass of snow and reach the cleft in the rocks.

"Just mark out where we have to get busy, Tolly Tip," called out Bobolink, after they had put aside their packs, and primed themselves for work, "and see how we can dig."

"I speak for first turn with the snow shovel!" cried Jud. "It'll bring a new set of muscles into play, for one thing, and that means relief. I own up that my legs feel pretty well tuckered out."

The woodsman, however, chose to begin the work himself. After taking his bearings carefully, he began to dig the snow shovel deep down, and cast the loosely packed stuff aside.

In order to reach the cleft in the rocks they would have to cut a tunnel through possibly twenty feet or more of snow.

So impatient was Jud to take a hand that he soon

begged the guide to let him have a turn at the work. Tolly Tip prowled around, and some of the boys wondered what he could be doing until he came back presently with great news.

"'Tis smoke I do be after smellin' beyant there!" he told them.

"Smoke!" exclaimed Bobolink, staring up the side of the white hill. "How can that be when there isn't the first sign of a fire?"

"You don't catch on to the idea, Bobolink," explained Paul. "He means that those in the cave must have some sort of fire going, and the smoke finds its way out through some small crevices that lie under a thin blanket of snow. Am I right there, Tolly Tip?"

"Ye sure hit the nail on the head, Paul," he was told by the guide.

"Well, that's good news," admitted Bobolink, with a look of relief on his face. "If they've got enough wood to keep even a small fire going, they won't be found frozen to death anyhow."

"And," continued Jud, who had given the shovel over to Jack, "it takes some days to really starve a fellow, I understand. You see I've been reading lately about the adventures of the Dr. Kane exploring company up in the frozen Arctic regions. When it got to the worst they staved off starvation by making soup of their boots."

"But you mustn't forget," interposed Bobolink, "that their boots were made of skins, and not of the tough leather we use these days. I'd like to see Hank Lawson gnawing on one of *his* old hide shoes, that's what! It couldn't be done, any way you fix it."

The hole grew by degrees, but very slowly. It seemed as though tons and tons of snow must have been swept over the crest of the hill, to settle down in every cavity it could find.

"We're getting there, all right!" declared Bobolink, after he had taken his turn, and in turn handed over the shovel to Paul.

"Oh! the Fourth of July is coming too, never fear!" jeered Jud, who was in a grumbling mood.

"Why, Tolly Tip here says we've made good progress already," Tom Betts declared, merely to combat the spirit manifested by Jud, "and that we'll soon be half-way through the pile. If it were three times as big we'd get there in the end, because this is a never-say-die bunch of scouts, you bet!"

"Oh! I was only fooling," chuckled Jud, feeling ashamed of his grumbling. "Of course, we'll manage it, by hook or by crook. Show me the time the Banner Boy Scouts ever failed, will you, when they'd set their minds on doing anything worth while? We're bound to get there."

The work went on. By turns the members of the relief party applied themselves to the task of cutting a way through the snow heap, and when each had come up for the third time it became apparent that they were near the end of their labor, for signs of the rock began to appear.

Inspired by this fact they took on additional energy, and the way the snow flew under the vigorous attack of Jud was pretty good evidence that he still believed in their ultimate success.

"Now watch my smoke!" remarked Tom Betts, as he took the shovel in his turn and proceeded to show them what he could do. "I've made up my mind to keep everlastingly at it till I strike solid rock. And I'll do it, or burst the boiler."

He had hardly spoken when they heard the plunging metal shovel strike something that gave out a positive "chink," and somehow that sound seemed to spell success.

"Guess you've gone and done it, Tom!" declared Jud, with something like a touch of chagrin in his voice, for Jud had been hoping he would be the lucky one to show the first results.

There was no slackening of their ardor, and the boys continued to shovel the snow out of the hole at a prodigious rate until every one could easily see the crevice in the rocks.

"Listen!" exclaimed Jud just then.

"Oh! what do you think you heard?" asked Bobolink.

"I don't know whether it was the shovel scraping over the rock or a human groan," Jud continued, looking unusually serious.

They all listened, but could hear nothing except the cold wind sighing through some of the trees not far away.

"Let me finish the work for you, Tom," suggested Paul, seeing that Tom Betts was pretty well exhausted from his labors.

"I guess I will, Paul, because I'm nearly tuckered out," admitted the persistent worker, as he handed the implement over, and pushed back, though still remaining in the hole.

Paul was not very long in clearing away the last of the snow that clogged the entrance to the old bears' den. They could then mark the line of the gaping hole that cleft the rock, and which served as an antechamber to the cavity that lay beyond.

"That does it, Paul," said Jack, softly; though just why he spoke half under his breath he could not have explained if he had been asked, except that, somehow, it seemed as though they were very close to some sort of tragedy.

The shovel was put aside. It had done its part of the work, and could rest. And everybody pre-

pared to follow Paul as he pushed after the guide into the crevice leading to the cave.

The smell of wood smoke was now very strong, and all of them could catch it.

So long as the entrapped boys had a fire there was no fear that they would perish from the cold. Moreover, down under the rocks and the snow the atmosphere could hardly be anything as severe as in the open. Indeed Paul had been in many caves where the temperature remained about the same day in and day out, through the whole year.

Coming from the bewildering and dazzling snow fields it was little wonder that none of them could see plainly at the moment they started into the bears' den. By degrees, as their eyes became accustomed to the semi-darkness that held sway below, they would be able to distinguish objects, and make discoveries.

Stronger grew the pungent odor of smoke. It was not unpleasant at all, and to some of the scouts most welcome, bearing as it did a message of hope, and the assurancc that things had not yet come to the last stretch.

Half turning as he groped his way onward, the guide pointed to something ahead—at least Paul who came next in line fancied that Tolly Tip was trying to draw his attention to that quarter.

In turn he performed the same office for the

next boy, and thus the intelligence was passed along the line, from hand to hand.

They could, by straining their eyes, discover some half huddled figures just beyond. A faint light showed where the dying fire lay; and even as they looked one of the partly seen figures was seen to stir, and after this they noticed that a little flame had started up.

Paul believed that the very last stick of wood was on the fire and nearing the end.

Bobolink could not help giving a low cry of commiseration. The sound must have been heard by those who were huddled around the miserable fire, for they scrambled to their knees. As the tiny blaze sprang up just then, it showed the scouts the four Stanhope boys looking pinched and wan, with their eyes staring the wonder they must have felt at sight of the newcomers.

Hank was seen to jab his knuckles into his eyes as though unable fully to believe what he beheld. Then he held out both hands beseechingly toward the newcomers. They would never be able to forget the genuine pain contained in his voice as he half groaned:

"Oh! have you come to save us? Give us somethin' to eat, won't you? We're starvin', starvin', I tell you!"

CHAPTER XXVII

"FIRST AID"

POSSIBLY the case was not quite as bad as Hank declared, but for all that those four lads were certainly in a bad way.

Paul took charge of affairs at once, as became the acting scout-master of the troop.

"It's a good thing we thought to pick up some wood as we came along," he remarked. "Fetch it in, boys, and get this fire going the first thing. Then we'll make a pot of coffee to begin with."

"Coffee!" echoed the four late prisoners of the cave. "Oh, my stars! why! we went and forgot to bring any along with us. Coffee! that sounds good to us!"

"That's only a beginning," said Bobolink, as he came back with his arms filled with sticks, which he began to lay upon the almost dead fire. "We've got ham and biscuits, Boston baked beans, potatoes, corn, grits, and lots of other things. Just give us a little time to do some cooking, and you'll get all you can cram down."

Paul knew the hungry boys would suffer all sorts of tortures while waiting for the meal to be cooked. On this account he saw that they were given some crackers and cheese, to take the keen edge of their voracious appetites off.

It was a strange spectacle in that hole amidst the rocks, with the fire leaping up, Bobolink bending over it doing the cooking with his customary vim, the rest of the scouts gathered around, and those four wretched fellows munching away for dear life, as they sniffed the coffee beginning to scent the air with its fragrance.

As soon as this was ready Paul poured out some, added condensed milk, and handed the tin cup to Hank.

He was really surprised to see the rough fellow turn immediately and give it to Sid Jeffreys and hear him say:

"I reckon you need it the wust, Sid; git the stuff inside in a hurry."

Then Paul remembered that Sid had recently been injured. And somehow he began to understand that even such a hardened case as Hank Lawson, in whom no one seemed ready to place any trust, might have a small, tender spot in his heart. He could not be *all* bad, Paul decided.

Hank, however, did not refuse to accept the second cup, and hastily drain it. Apparently, he

believed the leader should have first choice, and meant to impress this fact upon his satellites.

What to do about the four boys had puzzled Paul a little. To allow them to accompany him and his chums back to Deer Head Lodge would make the remainder of their outing a very disagreeable affair. Besides, there was really no room for any more guests under that hospitable roof; and certainly Tolly Tip would not feel in the humor to invite them.

So Paul had to figure it out in some other way. While Hank and his three cronies were eating savagely, Bobolink having finished preparing the odd meal for them, Paul took occasion to sound the one who occupied the position of chief.

"We've brought over enough grub to last you four a week," he started in to say, when Hank interrupted him.

"We sure think you're white this time, Paul Morrison, an' I ain't a-goin' to hold back in sayin' so either, just 'cause we've been scrappin' with your crowd right along. Guess you know that we come up here partly to bother you fellers. I'm right glad we ain't had a chance to play any tricks on you up to now. An' b'lieve me! it's goin' to be a long time 'fore we'll forgit this thing."

Paul was, of course, well pleased to hear this. He feared, however, that in a month from that

time Hank was apt to forget the obligations he owed the scouts, and likely enough would commence to annoy them again.

"The question that bothers me just now," Paul continued, "is what you ought to do. I don't suppose any of you care to stay up here much longer, now that this blizzard has spoiled all of the fun of camping out?"

"I've had about all I want of the game," admitted Jud Mabley, promptly.

"Count me in too," added Sim Jeffreys. "I feel pretty sick of the whole business, and we can't get back home any too soon to suit me."

"Same here," muttered Bud Phillips, who had kept looking at Paul for some time in a furtive way, as though he had something on his mind that he was strongly tempted to communicate to the scout leader.

"So you see that settles it," grinned Hank. "Even if I wanted to hang out here all the rest o' the holidays, three agin one is most too much. We'd be havin' all sorts o' rows every day. Yep, we'll start fur home the fust chance we git."

That pleased Paul, and was what he had hoped to hear.

"Of course," he went on to say to Hank, "it's a whole lot shorter cutting across country to Stanhope than going around by way of Lake Tokala

and the old canal that leads from the Radway into the Bushkill river; but you want to be mighty careful of your compass points, or you might get lost."

"Sure thing, Paul," remarked the other, confidently; "but that's my long suit, you ought to know. Never yet did git lost, an' I reckon I ain't a-goin' to do it now. I'll lay it all out and make the riffle, don't you worry about that same."

"We came over that way, you know," interrupted Jud Mabley, "and left blazes on the trees in places where we thought we might take the wrong trail goin' back."

"That was a wise thing to do," said Paul, "and shows that some of you ought to be in the scout movement, for you've got it in you to make good."

"Tried it once you 'member, Paul, but your crowd didn't want anything to do wi' me, so I cut it out," grumbled Jud, though he could not help looking pleased at being complimented on the woodcraft of their crowd by such an authority as the scout-master.

Paul turned from Jud and looked straight into the face of the leader.

"Hank," he said earnestly, "you know just as well as I do that Jud was blackballed not because we didn't believe he had it in him to make an excellent scout, but for another reason. Excuse me if I'm blunt about it, but I mean it just as much

for your good as I did bringing this food all the way over here to help you out. Every one of you has it in him to make a good scout, if only he would change certain ways he now has."

Hank looked down at his feet, and remained silent for a brief time, during which he doubtless was having something of an inward fight.

"All right, Paul," he suddenly remarked, looking up again grimly. "I ain't a-goin' to git mad 'cause you speak so plain. If you fellers'd go to all the trouble to fight your way over here, and fetch us this food, I reckon as how I've been readin' you the wrong way."

"You have, Hank! You certainly have!" affirmed Bobolink, who was greatly interested in this effort on the part of Paul to bring about a change in the boys who had taken such malicious delight in annoying the scouts whenever the opportunity arose.

"Believe this, Hank," said Paul earnestly; "if you only chose to change your ways, none of you would be blackballed the next time you tried to join the organization. There's no earthly reason why all of you shouldn't be accepted as candidates if only you can subscribe to the iron-bound rules we work under, and which every one of us has to obey. Think it over, won't you, boys? It might pay you."

"Reckon we will, Paul," muttered Hank, though he shook his head at the same time a little doubtfully, as though deep down in his heart he feared they could never overcome the feeling of prejudice that had grown up against them in Stanhope.

"I wouldn't be in too big a hurry to start back home," continued Paul, thinking he had already said enough to fulfill his duty as a scout. "In another day or so it's likely to warm up a bit, and you'll find it more comfortable on the way."

"Just what I was thinkin' myself, Paul," agreed Hank. "We've got stacks of grub now, thanks to you and your crowd, and we c'n git enough wood in places, now you've opened our dooryard fur us. Yep, we'll hang out till it feels some warmer, and then cut sticks fur home."

"Here's a rough map I made out that may be useful to you, Hank," continued the scout-master, "if you happen to lose your blazed trail. Tolly Tip helped me get it up, and as he's been across to Stanhope many times he ought to know every foot of the way."

"It might come in handy, an' I'll take the same with thanks, Paul," Hank observed, with all his customary aggressive ways lacking. There is nothing so well calculated to take the spirit out of a boy as acute hunger.

When they had talked for some little time

longer, Paul decided that it was time for him and his chums to start back to the cabin. Those afternoons in late December were very short, and night would be down upon them almost before they knew it.

It was just then that Bud Phillips seemed to have made up his mind to say something that had been on the tip of his tongue ever since he realized under what great obligations the scouts had placed him and his partners.

"Seems like I oughtn't to let you get away from here, Paul, without tellin' somethin' that I reckon might be interestin' to you all," he went on to say.

"All right, Bud, we'll be glad to hear it," the scout-master observed, with a smile, "though for the life of me I can't guess what it's all about."

"Go ahead Bud, and dish it out!" urged Bobolink, impatiently.

CHAPTER XXVIII

MORE STARTLING NEWS

BUD PHILLIPS looked somewhat confused. Apparently, he did not figure any too well in what he felt it his duty to confess to Paul and his chums.

"I'm ashamed that I kept mum about it when the old man accused some of you fellers of startin' the fire, an' gettin' at his tight wad," he went on to say; and it can be easily understood that this beginning gave Paul a start.

"Oh! it's about that ugly business, is it?" the scout-master remarked, frowning a little, for, naturally, he instantly conceived the idea that Hank and his three reckless cronies must have had a hand in that outrage.

That Hank guessed what was flitting through the other's mind was plainly indicated by the haste with which he cried out:

"Don't git it in your head we had anything to do with that fire, Paul, nor yet with tappin' the old man's safe. I know we ain't got any too good reputations 'round Stanhope, but it's to be hoped

we ain't dropped so low as that. Skip along, Bud, an' tell what you saw."

"Why, it's this way," continued the narrator, eagerly. "I chanced to be Johnny-on-the-spot that night, being 'mong the first to arrive when old Briggs started to scream that his store was afire. Never mind how it came that way. And Paul, I saw two figures a-runnin' away right when I came up, runnin' like they might be afraid o' bein' seen an' grabbed."

"Were they close enough for you to notice who they were?" asked Paul, taking a deep interest in the narration, since he and his chums had been accused of doing the deed in the presence of many of Stanhope's good people.

"Oh! I saw 'em lookin' back as they hurried away," admitted Bud. "And, Paul, they were those same two tramps we had the trouble with that day. You remember we ran the pair out o' town, bombardin' 'em with rocks."

Paul could plainly see the happening in his memory, with the two hoboes turning when at a safe distance to shake their fists at the boys. Evidently their rough reception all around had caused them to have a bitter feeling toward the citizens of Stanhope, and they had come back later on to have their revenge.

"Now that I think of it," Paul went on to say,

"they had just come out of the store when you ran afoul of the pair. The chances are that Mr. Briggs treated them as sourly as he does all their class, and they were furiously mad at him."

"Yes," added Bobolink, "and while in there they must have noticed where he had his safe. Maybe they saw him putting money in it."

"I'm glad you told me this, Bud," the scoutmaster confessed, "because it goes part way to clear up the mystery of that fire and robbery."

"Bud was meanin' to tell all about it when we got back," said Hank. "He kept still because he heard Briggs accuse you scouts of the fire racket, and Bud just then thought it too good a joke to spoil. But we've been talkin' it over, and come to the conclusion we owed it to the community to set 'em right."

This sounded rather lofty, but Paul guessed that there must be another reason back of the determination to tell. These fellows had decided that possibly suspicion might be directed toward them, and, as they had had enough trouble already without taking more on their shoulders, it would be the part of wisdom to start the ball rolling in the right quarter.

"Well, we must be going," said Paul.

"Do you reckon on stayin' out your time up here?" queried Hank.

"We haven't decided that yet," replied the scout-master; "but the chances are we shall conclude to cut the trip short and get back home. This heavy snow has spoiled a good many plans we'd laid out; and we might be having a better time of it with the rest of the fellows at home. We're going to talk it over and by to-morrow settle on our plans."

"Here's where we get busy and start on the return hike," announced Tom Betts, just as cheerily as though he were not already feeling the effects of that stiff plunge through the deep snowdrifts, and secretly faced the return trip with more or less apprehension.

Hank and his followers came out of their den to wave a hearty farewell after their late rescuers. Just then all animosities had died in their hearts, and they could look upon the scouts without the least bitterness.

"Sounds all mighty fine, I must say," remarked Bobolink, as they pushed along, after losing sight of the quartette standing at the foot of the snowy hill, "but somehow I don't seem to feel it's going to last. That Hank's got it in him to be a tough character, and it'd be next door to a miracle if he ever changed his ways."

"Do *you* think he will, Paul?" demanded Jud, flatly.

"Ask me something easy," laughed the scoutmaster. "It all depends on Hank himself. If he once took a notion to make a man of himself, I believe he could do it no matter what happened. He's got the grit, but without the real desire that isn't going to count for much. Time alone will tell."

"Well, we've seen something like that happen right in our town, you know," Bobolink went on to say, reflectively, as he trudged along close to the heels of the one in front of him, for they were going "Indian-file," following the sinuous trail made during their preceding trip.

"I was talking with the other Jud," remarked Jud Elderkin just then, "and he gave me a pointer that might be worth something. I don't know just why he chose to confide it to me, instead of speaking out, but he did."

"Was it, too, about the fire and the robbery?" asked Tom Betts.

"It amounted to the same thing, I should say," replied Jud, "because it was connected with the hoboes."

"Go on and tell us then," urged Bobolink.

"He says they're up in this part of the country," asserted the other.

"Wow! that begins to look as if we might be running across the ugly pair after all!" exclaimed

Tom Betts, his face lighting up with eagerness. "Now wouldn't it be queer if we managed to capture the yeggs and turn 'em over to the authorities? Paul, how about that now?"

"Oh! you're getting too far ahead of the game, Tom," he was told. "We must know a good deal more about this business before we could decide to take such desperate chances."

"But if the opportunity came along, wouldn't it be our duty to cage the rascals?" the persistent Tom demanded.

"Perhaps it might," Paul told him. "But Jud, did he explain to you how he came to know the tramps were up here in the woods above Lake Tokala?"

"Just what he did," replied the other, promptly. "It seems that Jud, while he was out hunting, had a glimpse of one of the ugly pair the day before this storm hit us. It gave him a chance to trail the man in order to see what he was worth in that line. And, Paul, he did his work so well that he followed the fellow all the way to where the two of them had put up."

"And that was where, Jud?" demanded the leader of the troop.

"There's an old dilapidated cabin half-way between here and the lake," explained Jud. "Maybe Tolly Tip knows about it."

"Sure that I do!" responded the woodsman. " 'Twas used years ago by some charcoal burners, but has been goin' to decay this long time. Mebbe now they've patched up the broken roof, and mane to stay there awhile. It's in a snug spot, and mighty well protected from the wind in winters."

"That's the place," Jud assured them. "The hoboes are hanging out there, and seem to have plenty to eat, so Jud Mabley told me. If we concluded to take a look in at 'em on our way home it could be done easy enough, I'd think."

"We'll talk it over," decided Paul. "We must remember that in all likelihood they're a desperate pair, and well armed. As a rule scouts have no business to constitute themselves criminal catchers, though in this case it's a bit different."

"Because we've been publicly accused by Mr. Briggs of being the persons who set his old store on fire, just in spite!" declared Bobolink, briskly enough. "And say! wouldn't it be a bully trick if we could take those two tramps back with us, having the goods on them? Then we'd say to Mr. Briggs: 'There you are, sir! These are the men you want! And we'd trouble you to make your apology just as public as your hasty accusation was.' "

"Hurrah!" cried Tom Betts. "That's the ticket."

But Paul was not to be hurried into giving a decision. He wanted more time to consider matters, and settle his plan of campaign. The other scouts, however, found little reason to doubt that in the end he would conclude to look favorably on the bold proposition Jud had advanced.

Just as they had anticipated, the return journey was not anywhere nearly so strenuous an undertaking as the outward tramp had been. Even where they had to cross great drifts a passage had been broken for them, and the wind, not being high, had failed to fill up the gaps thus far.

The rescue party arrived in the vicinity of the cabin long before sundown, and could catch whiffs of the wood smoke that blew their way, which gave promise of the delightful warmth they would find once inside the forest retreat.

CHAPTER XXIX

THE WILD DOG PACK

"WELL! well! what under the sun's been going on here while we've been away?"

Bobolink burst out with this exclamation the very minute he passed hastily in at the cabin door. A jolly fire blazed on the hearth, and the interior of the cabin was well lighted by the flames.

Paul, as well as all the other arrivals, stared. And well they might, for Sandy Griggs and Bluff were swathed in seemingly innumerable bandages. They looked a bit sheepish too, even while grinning amiably.

"Oh! 'tisn't as bad as it seems, fellows!" sang out Spider Sexton, cheerfully. "Phil thought it best to wash every scratch with that stuff we keep for such things, so as to avoid any danger of blood poisoning. But shucks! they got off pretty easy, let me tell you."

"What happened?" demanded Jud Elderkin, curiously. "Did they run across that old bear after all, and get scratched or bitten?"

"Or was it the other bobcat that came around to smell the pelt of his mate, and gave you something of a tussle?" asked Bobolink.

"Both away off your base," said Bluff, with a fresh grin. "It was dogs, that's all."

"Dogs!" echoed Jud, unbelievingly. "You must mean wolves, don't you? They look a heap like some kinds of mongrel dogs."

" 'Tis the lad as knows what he is talkin' about, I guess," remarked Tolly Tip just then. "Sure, for these many moons now there's been a pack av thim wild dogs a-runnin' through the woods. Many a night have I listened to the same bayin' and yappin' as they trailed after a deer."

A flash of understanding came into Jud's face.

"Oh! now I see what you mean," he went on to say. "Wild dogs they were, that for some reason have abandoned their homes with people, and gone back to the old free hunting ways of their ancestors. I've heard about such things. But say! how did it happen they tackled you two?"

Bluff and his guilty companion exchanged looks, and as he scratched his head the former went on to confess.

"Why, you see, it was this way," he began. "Sandy and I began to get awful tired of staying indoors after you fellows went away. Three days of it was just too much for our active natures to

stand. So we made up a plan to take a little walk around, and see if we could run across any game."

At that Sandy held up a couple of partridges.

"All we got, and all we saw," he remarked, "but they were enough to set that savage bunch of wild dogs on us. Whew! but they were hungry and reckless. But you go on and tell the story, Bluff."

"When we saw them heading our way," continued the other, "we thought they were just ordinary dogs running loose. But as they came closer both of us began to see that they were a savage looking lot. In the lead was a big mastiff that looked like a lion to us."

"But you had your guns with you, didn't you?" asked Jud.

"That's right, we did," replied Bluff. "But you see before we made up our minds the kiyi crowd was dangerous they were nearly on us, yelping and snapping like everything. That big chap in the lead gave me a shiver just to look at him; and there were three others coming full-tilt close behind him."

"We've since made up our minds," again interrupted Sandy, "that they must have scented our birds, and were crazy to get them. Though even if we'd thrown the partridges away I believe the pack would have attacked us like so many tigers."

"At the very last," Bluff went on, "I knew we ought to be doing something. So I yelled out to Sandy who had the shotgun to pepper that big mastiff before he could jump us, and that I'd take care of the next creature."

"Well, I tried to do it," Sandy affirmed, "but my first shot went wild, because Bluff here knocked my elbow just when I pulled the trigger. But I had better luck with the second barrel, for I brought one of the other dogs down flat on his back, kicking his last."

"I'd shot a second creature meanwhile," said Bluff; "and then the other two were on us. Whew! but we did have a warm session of it about that time, let me tell you, fellows! It was at close quarters, so I couldn't use my gun again to shoot; but we swung the weapons around our heads as though they were clubs."

"I made a lucky crack," declared Sandy, "and bowled the smaller cur over, but he was up like a flash and at me again, scratching and biting like a mad wolf. I never would have believed family pets could go back to the wild state again like that if I hadn't seen it with my own eyes."

"I suppose the big beast tackled you then, did he, Bluff?" asked Jack.

"You just b-b-bet he did!" exclaimed the other, excitedly. "And s-s-say, I had all I could do to

k-k-keep him from knocking me over in a h-h-heap. Lots of t-t-times I cracked him with the b-b-butt of my rifle, and staggered him, but he only c-came at me again full tilt. Oh! but we had a g-g-glorious time of it I tell you!"

"And how did it end?" queried Jud. "Since we find you two here right-side-up-with-care we must believe that in the final wind-up you got the better of your canine enemies."

"C-c-canine d-d-don't seem to fit the c-c-crime this time, Jud," expostulated Bluff. "It sounds so mild. Well, we lathered 'em right and left, and took quite a number of s-s-scratches in return. B-b-both of us were getting pretty well winded, and I was b-b-beginning to be afraid of the outcome, when all at once I remembered that I had other b-b-bullets in my gun."

"Wise old head, that of yours, Bluff," commented Jud, with a touch of satire in his voice. "Better late than never I should say. Well, what did you do then?"

"Next chance I got I managed to turn my gun around and grip the stock," and as he said this Bluff reached over to pick up his repeating rifle to exhibit the dents, as well as the half dried blood spots on the walnut shoulder piece, all of which went to prove the truth of his story as words never could have done.

"That was the end of Mr. Mastiff then, eh?" continued Jud.

"Oh, well! I hated to do it," Bluff told them, "for he was a beaut of a beast, so strong and handsome; but then those shining teeth looked pretty ugly to me, and he was wild to get them at my throat, so there wasn't really any choice."

"I should say not!" declared Phil Towns, shuddering at the picture Bluff was drawing of the spirited encounter.

"So I shot him," said Bluff, simply. "And at that the remaining beast lit out as fast as he could, because with the fall of the leader of the pack he lost his grit. Course after that Sandy'n I couldn't think of hunting any longer. We figured that we ought to get back home and have our cuts looked after. And Paul, Phil has done a dandy job with that potash stuff."

"Glad to hear it," said the scout-master, quickly, "though I'll take a look myself to make sure. Scratches from carniverous animals are very dangerous on account of the poison that may cling to their claws. It's always best to be on the safe side, and neutralize the danger."

"And Paul," continued Bluff, "will you accept one of these fat birds from us?"

"Not much I will!" declared the other immediately. "Why should I be favored over the rest

of the crowd? You and Sandy earned the right to enjoy a feast, and we'll see to it that you have it to-morrow. Let them hang until then; game is always better for lying a few days before being eaten, you know."

Of course, those who had remained at home were curious to know whether the rescue expedition had been successful or not.

"We needn't ask if you found Hank and his crowd," declared Spider Sexton, wisely, "for as scouts we are educated to observe things, and first of all we notice that none of you has come back with the pack he took away. That tells us the story. But please go on and give the particulars, Paul."

"We managed to find them just when they had their last stick on the fire," the scout-master commenced to relate. "We had to dig a way in to them, for there was an enormous drift banked up against their exit that they hadn't even begun to cut through."

"How lucky you got there on time!" cried Frank Savage. "Once more scouts have proved themselves masters of circumstances. Bully for Stanhope Troop! I bet you they were glad to see you! Yes, and like as not told you they were sorry for ever having done anything to annoy our crowd."

"You've hit it to a dot, Frank," admitted Jud. "Hank shows some signs of meaning to turn over a new leaf, and Paul even believes there's a hope; but somehow the rest of us reckon its the old story over again. Once they get on their own stamping grounds, by degrees they'll forget all we've done for them, and be back at their old tricks again. What's bred in the bone can't easily be beaten out of the flesh, my father says."

"But it does happen once in a while," admonished Paul; "so we'll drop the subject for the present. If Hank starts in to do the right thing, though, remember that it's our duty as scouts to give him all the help we can. And now let's settle on the menu for supper, because we're all of us as hungry as wolves."

While some of the boys were busying themselves around the fire, Paul took a look at the slight injuries of the two aspiring hunters, and complimented the pleased Philip on the clever way he had attended to their necessities.

CHAPTER XXX

A CHANGE OF PLANS

THAT night, as the lads sat before the fire, those who had gone on the expedition of succor had to tell further particulars, for the others were curious to know about everything.

When they heard how Bud Phillips had seen the two tramps running away from the vicinity of the fire before hardly any one else was around, of course Bluff and the four other scouts were fully agreed that the mystery of the blaze had been as good as explained.

"All the same," Jud remarked, "unless we can show some clinching evidence our theory won't hold water with a lot of people who always have to be given solid proof. That brings up the subject we talked about on the way home—should we pay a visit to that charcoal burners' cabin, and try to make prisoners of the yeggs?"

"Great scheme, I'd say!" burst out Frank Savage without any hesitation.

"B-b-bully idea, let me tell you!" added Bluff.

"Whee!" exclaimed Sandy. "Nearly takes my breath away just to hear you mention such a bold thing; but I'm game to try it if the rest are."

Paul smiled. Truth to tell he had discounted all this, knowing what an impetuous lot his followers were, and how prone to push aside all thought of personal danger when tempted to perform some act that might redound to their credit.

"Plenty of time yet to talk that over," he told them. "We needn't decide too hastily, and will let the subject rest for the present, though I don't mind saying that the chances are we'll conclude to do something along those lines when on our way home."

"Is the charcoal burners' shack far away from the creek, Tolly Tip?" questioned Bobolink, anxiously.

"By the same token I do belave it lies not more'n a quarrter av a mile off from the strame. I c'n lade ye to the same with me eyes shut," announced the woodsman, evidently just as eager to take part in the rounding up of the vagrants as any of the enthusiastic scouts; for his eye was still a little discolored from the blow he had received in the fight with the desperate tramps.

As their time was limited, Paul knew that they should plan carefully if they were to accomplish all the things they were most desirous of carrying

through. On that account he had each one make up his mind just what was dearest to him, and set about accomplishing that one thing without any unnecessary delay.

As for Paul himself, he most of all regretted the fact that on account of the deep snowdrifts and the bitter cold he would probably be unable to get any more flashlight pictures.

"You see," he explained to some of the others when they were asking why he felt so disappointed, "most of the smaller animals are buried out of sight by the snow. Like the squirrels, they take time by the forelock, and have laid in a supply of food, enough to last over this severe spell, so none of them will be anxious to show up in a hurry."

"But I heard Tolly Tip giving you a real tip about the sly mink along the bank of the creek. How about it, Paul?" asked Jud.

"Well, that's really my only chance," admitted the scout-master. "It seems that minks have a perfect scorn for wintry weather around here, Tolly says, and are on the job right along, no matter how it storms. He knows of one big chap who has a regular route over which he travels nearly every night, going in and out of holes in the banks as if going visiting."

"I don't believe you've ever had a good snapshot of a live mink, have you, Paul?" inquired

Bluff, showing more or less interest, though still somewhat stiff with the painful scratches he had received on the previous day.

"I've always wanted to get such a flashlight," admitted Paul, "because the mink is said to be one of the shyest of all small, fur-bearing animals, even more so than Br'er Fox, and considerably more timid than Br'er 'Coon."

"You'll have to set the trap to-night then, won't you?" asked Tom Betts.

"We've made all arrangements looking to such a thing," Tom was assured. "I'm glad that it still stays clear and cold. We may only have a couple more nights in Camp Garrity."

"But it's getting a little milder, don't you think?" inquired Bobolink.

"It's a big improvement on yesterday, and I imagine to-morrow will see a further change," the scout-master remarked.

"Then if those fellows in the cave mean to strike out for home they'll like as not find their chance by to-morrow," observed Jud. "Course they've got enough grub to keep them for a week. But it isn't much fun staying cooped up in a cave, and I reckon they've had enough of it. Sim and Jud acted that way, not to mention Bud Phillips."

"Before we make our start I'd like to take a last turn over that way," Paul observed, as though

he had been thinking the matter over. "I'd just like to see if they did strike out across the timber. Their trail would tell the story, and we'd know what to expect."

"I speak to go with you then," flashed back Jud, even as Bluff opened his mouth to give utterance to the same desire.

"T-t-that's what a fellow gets for being a stutterer," grumbled Bluff. "I meant to say just those words, but Jud—hang the l-l-luck—was too speedy for me. Huh!"

"Oh! as for that," laughed Paul, "both of you can go along if you care to."

As the day dragged along the scouts busied themselves in a dozen different ways according to their liking. Some preferred to swing the axe and chop wood, though doubtless if they had been compelled to do this at home, loud and bitter would have been their lamentations.

During the afternoon several went out for a walk, carrying guns along so as to be prepared for either game, or another pack of hungry wild dogs, though Tolly Tip assured them that, so far as he knew, there had existed only the one pack, with that enormous mastiff as leader.

"If ye follow the directions I've been after givin' yees, it may be ye'll come on a bevy av pa'tridges," the woodsman told them as they were

setting out. "For by the same token whin we've had a heavy snowfall I've always been able to knock down a lot av the birrds among the berry bushes. 'Tis there they must go to git food or be starved entirely. Good luck to ye, boys, an' kape yer weather eye open so ye won't git lost!"

"Remember," added Paul, "if you do lose your bearings stop right still and fire three shots in rapid succession. Later on try it again, and we'll come to you. But with such clever woodsmen along as Jack and Bobolink we don't expect anything of that kind to happen, of course."

Paul himself went with the keeper of the woods lodge to follow the frozen creek up to a certain place where there were numerous holes in the bank. Here Tolly Tip pointed out little footprints made he said by the minks on the preceding night.

"Av course," the woodsman went on to say, "ye do be knowin' a hape better nor me jist where the best place to set the trap might be. All I c'n do is to show ye the p'int where the minks is most like to travel to-night."

"That is just what I want you to do!" exclaimed Paul. "But you can help me out in fixing things, so when the mink takes the bait and pulls the string he'll be sure to crouch directly in front of my camera trap."

Between them they eventually arranged matters, and then the trapper removed all traces of their presence possible, after which they returned to the cabin.

"If the trap isn't sprung to-night I'll have another try-out," Paul affirmed, "for it may be a long while before I'll get another such chance to snap off Mr. Sly Mink in his own preserves."

"Oh! make your mind aisy on that score," said Tolly Tip, reassuringly. "I do be knowing the ways av the crature so well I c'n promise ye there'll be no hitch. That bait I set is sure to fetch him ivery time. I've sildom known it to fail."

The afternoon came to an end, and the glow of sunset filled the heavens over in the west. The hunters came trooping in, much to the satisfaction of some of the stay-at-homes, who were beginning to fear something might have happened to them.

"We heard a whole lot of shots away off somewhere," asserted Phil Towns, "so show us what you've got in the game pockets of your hunting coats to make them bulge out that way."

"I've got three fat partridges," said Jack.

"Two for me—one in each pocket!" laughed Bobolink.

Then Jack and Bobolink looked expectantly toward Jud as though expecting him to make a still better showing.

At that Jud began to unload, and before he stopped he had laid six birds on the rough deal table. At that there was much rejoicing.

"Just enough to go around!" exclaimed Sandy Griggs. "I was beginning to be sorry Bluff and I had gone and cooked our birds, but now it's all right. Here's for a bully mess to-morrow."

"We've certainly made a big hole in your partridge supply since coming up here, Tolly Tip," announced Bobolink, proudly. "And there's one deer less, too."

"Only one," said Jud, regretfully; and Paul knew he must be thinking of the stag responsible for the tracks seen on that day when they were on duty bent, and could not turn aside to do any hunting.

"Well, to-morrow may be our last day here," remarked the scout-master, "so every one of you had better wind up your affairs, to be ready to start home."

CHAPTER XXXI

GOOD-BYE TO DEER HEAD LODGE

"I THINK I'll sleep a whole lot better to-night," announced Bobolink, as he gave a huge yawn, and stretched his arms high above his head.

"What's the reason?" demanded Jud, quickly. "Are you happy because we're going to break camp so much sooner than we expected, owing to everything being snowed under up here in the woods?"

"Bobolink doesn't get enough to eat, I reckon," suggested Tom Betts.

"If he doesn't it's his own fault then," Jack went on to say, "because he has more to do with the cooking end of the game than any of us."

"I guess I know what he means," hinted Spider Sexton, mysteriously.

"Then get a move on you, Spider, and enlighten the rest of us," coaxed Sandy, as he cuddled a bit closer to the crackling fire, for the wind had arisen again, and parts of the cabin were chilly, despite the roaring blaze.

"Why, the fact of the matter is, Bobolink has a new girl to take to barn dances and all that this winter," said Spider, boldly. "It's that pretty Rose Dexter belonging to the new family in town. Oh! you needn't grin at me that way, Bobolink. I own up I was doing my best to cut in on you there, but you seemed to have the inside track of me and I quit. But she *is* a peach if ever there was one!"

"Well, do you blame me then for feeling satisfied when we talk of going home?" demanded the accused scout. "All the same you're all away off in your guesses. I'm hoping to sleep soundly tonight just because my mind is free from wondering who set that incendiary fire and tapped Mr. Briggs' safe."

"Oh! so that's the reason, is it?" laughed Paul. "I've been watching you more or less since we came up here, and I wondered if you hadn't been trying to figure that mystery out. I'm glad for your sake, as well as for some others' sakes, that we've been able to clear that thing up."

"All I hope now is that on our way back home we can stop off and pay the hoboes a little friendly visit," continued Bobolink.

"Same here," Jud added, quickly. "Even if our outing hasn't been everything we hoped for, it would even things up some if we could march into

Stanhope and hand the guilty men over to the police."

Indeed, Bobolink was not the only scout who slept "like a rock" on that night. Most of the boys were very tired after the exertions of the day, and, besides, now that it had been decided to return home, they really had a load removed from their minds.

Of course, all of them could have enjoyed a much longer stay at Deer Head Lodge had the conditions been normal. That tremendous fall of snow, something like two feet on the level, Paul felt, had utterly prostrated many of their best plans, and facing a protracted siege of it did not offer a great deal of attraction.

With the coming of morning they were once more astir, and were soon as busy as a hive of bees. Each scout seemed intent on getting as much done as possible while the day lasted.

Tolly Tip alone looked sober. The quaint and honest fellow had taken a great liking to his guests, and looked forward to their speedy departure with something akin to dismay.

"Sure the rist av the winter will same a dreary time with not a hearty young voice to give me gratin' av a mornin'," he told Paul. "Indade, I don't know how I'm goin' to stand for the same at all, at all."

"I'll tell you this, Tolly Tip," replied the scout leader emphatically. "If we get off during the Easter holidays some of us may take a run up here to visit you again. And perhaps you'll find occasion to come to Stanhope in some business dealings with Mr. Garrity. In that case you must let us know. I'll call a special meeting of the scouts, and you'll be our honored guest."

The old woodsman was visibly affected by these hearty words. He led a lonely life of it, although until the coming of these merry boys it had not seemed especially so. They had aroused long buried memories of his own boyhood, and given him a "new lease of life," as he declared.

Nothing remarkable happened on this last day in camp, though numerous things took place. Paul saw to it that in the afternoon the boys got everything ready to pack so there would be little delay in the morning, and they could get an early start if the weather conditions were at all favorable.

The weather remained good. The great storm must have covered a considerable stretch of territory east of the Mississippi and the Great Lakes and cleared the atmosphere wonderfully, for again the morning dawned without a threatening cloud to give cause for anxiety.

There was considerable bustle inside the cabin

and out of it about that time. Packs were being done up, though in much smaller compass than when the boys arrived at the camp, since only enough food was being taken along to serve for a couple of meals.

All the rest they only too gladly bequeathed to their genial host. Many were the silent resolves on the part of the boys as to what they would send up to Deer Head Lodge if ever the chance arrived, tobacco for Tolly Tip's pipe being of course the main idea, since he seemed to lack nothing else.

On Tolly Tip's part, he forced each of the lads to pack away a particular pelt which they were to have made into some sort of small article, just to remember the glorious outing in the snowy woods by.

At last the time came to say good-bye to the camp, and it was with unanimous agreement that the scouts clustered in a bunch, swung their hats, and gave three parting cheers for the lodge in the wilderness.

Tolly Tip had laid out their course, and on the way the main body halted while he and Paul tramped over to the foot of the hill where the cave among the rocks lay.

Paul was pleased to find the cave empty and the ashes cold where the fire had burned, thus proving

that Hank and his three companions had started overland for home on the previous day.

Once more joining the others, they continued on their way.

"Next in line come our friends, the hobo yeggmen!" remarked Jud, with a grim closing of his lips.

"Listen," said Paul, impressively, "for the last time I want to caution you all to follow the directions I've given. We must try to creep up on that old shack, and find out what the tramps are doing before we show our hand."

"Well, what have scouts been learning woodcraft for if they can't do a bit of spy work?" asked Jud, boldly. "All you have to do, Paul, is to pick those you want to keep you company when you make the grand creep; while the rest hang out close by, ready to jump in at the signal and make it unanimous."

It might have been noticed, were one watching closely, that Jud said this with a complacent smile hovering about his lips. The reason was easily guessed, because Jud really had no peer among the members of Stanhope Troop of Boy Scouts when it came to creeping up on game or some pretended enemy.

He had often proved his superiority in this respect, and could therefore take it for granted

that the scout-master would pick him out to accompany him on an occasion like this.

"All right, Jud," said Paul, smilingly, for he understood very well how the other felt, "I'll take Jack with me, Bobolink, and Tom Betts as well—yes, and you may come along too, I guess."

Some of them snickered at this, while Jud glared haughtily around and shrugged his shoulders, looking aggrieved, until Paul took occasion to whisper in his ear:

"That was meant for a joke you understand, Jud. Of course, I couldn't think of doing this thing without your help."

Later on Tolly Tip announced that they would now leave the creek and head in the direction of the abandoned charcoal burners' shack. All the scouts felt more or less of a thrill in anticipation of what was to come.

"I only hope," Jud was heard to mutter, aggressively, "that they haven't gone and skedaddled since Bud Phillips saw 'em in the place. That'd make me feel pretty sore, let me tell you!"

"Not much chance of that happening, Jud," Jack assured the grumbler, "unless by some accident their supplies got low. And Bud said they seemed to have enough on hand to last for weeks. Everything's going to turn out as we want it, make up your mind to that."

The old woodsman knew every rod of territory around that section, and could have led his charges in a bee-line to the shack except for the snow-drifts. Of course, these caused more or less meandering, but in the end they came to a place where Tolly Tip raised a warning finger.

Every boy knew by that they must be close upon the shack. Indeed, a whiff of wood smoke floated their way just then, announcing that the goal was at hand.

They moved on for a couple of minutes. Then all could glimpse the dilapidated cabin amidst the snow piles, with smoke oozing from its disabled mud and slab chimney. Paul made a gesture that they recognized, whereupon part of the company came to a halt and hid, while the others crept on with the leader.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CAPTURE OF THE HOBO YEGGMEN

LONG practice had made the scouts adepts at this sort of work. They could creep up on an unsuspecting sentry almost as cleverly as those copper-colored natives of the American woods whom all Boy Scouts copy when studying woodcraft.

Then again the piles of snow helped, as well as hindered, them more or less. But except for that column of blue wood smoke drifting lazily upward over the cabin there was really no sign of life about the place.

Paul, Tolly Tip and the others of the scouting party soon reached the rear of the shack. They could easily see where the two tramps had actually worked to close up most of the chinks between the logs, to keep the bitter cold air and the driving snow out of their refuge.

Men of their sort would never think of staying for a week or two amidst such barren surroundings so long as there remained a warm county jail

ready to accommodate them with free lodging—that is, unless they had a good reason for wanting to avoid civilization.

Paul, believing that they had set that fire and robbed Mr. Briggs' safe, could understand just why they remained here in seclusion. They doubtless feared suspicion may have been pointed in their direction, and that something of a search was being indulged in looking to their ultimate capture.

As soon as they arrived close to the walls of the shack the boys searched for some crevice through which they might gain a view of the interior.

Several managed to dig peep-holes by detaching the frozen mud that the tramps had plastered over open chinks. They applied their eyes to such crevices, and first of all discovered a blazing fire. Then a movement on one side drew their attention to the taller vagrant sitting quietly smoking his black pipe as though quite contented with his lot of idleness, so long as his wants were fairly well supplied.

It happened that the wind had gone down, and there brooded over the snowy forest a deep silence. This fact allowed the listeners without to catch the sound of voices inside the hut, for one of the tramps talked heavily, and the other had a

high-pitched voice that carried like a squeaking fife.

What they were saying just then instantly riveted the attention of the listeners, for as though by some strange freak it had an intimate connection with the object of the scouts' coming to the spot.

The shorter man seemed to have been doing some work on his injured hand, for he was now carefully wrapping a fresh rag around it. At the same time he was grumbling because of the pain his injury gave him.

"I never knowed how bad a burn was till now, Billy," was the burden of his complaint. "I've been shot and hurted in every other way, but this here's the fust time I ever got licked by fire. It's a-goin' to be the last time too, if I knows it."

"Any fool had ought to know better'n to play with fire," the other told him between his teeth as he sucked at his pipe. "I reckons that ye'd been wuss hurt nor that if I hadn't slapped a pail o' water over ye, and put ye out. Gotter stand fur it, Shorty, till the new skin comes along. A burn is wuss nor a cut any day."

"I on'y hopes as how it's well afore we skip outen this hole," the sufferer went on to say, still unappeased. "If we git in a tight hole I'd need both my fins to do business with. A one-handed

man ain't got much chance to slip away when the cornfield cops make a raid."

"They ain't goin' to bother us any! Make up yer mind to that same, boy," continued the tall vagrant, complacently. "When the time comes, an' the weather lets up on us a bit, why, we'll jest flit outen this region by the back door. I'm only mad as hops 'bout one thing."

"Yep, an' I know what it be, 'cause ye been harpin' on that subject right along, Billy. Yer disapp'inted 'cause the old man didn't have a bigger haul in his cracked safe."

"Well, that's what ails me," admitted the other in a grumbilng way. "We'd a been fixed fur a year to come if only he'd had a good wad lyin' low, 'stead of a measly bunch of the long green."

"Better luck next time, Billy, say I," continued the shorter tramp, as he finished fastening the soiled rag about his left hand and wrist.

It can be easily understood that Paul had heard quite enough by this time. There was not the slightest doubt in the world that Billy and his partner had been guilty of setting fire to Mr. Briggs' store, and had also broken open his ancient safe to extract whatever amount of money happened to be in it at the time.

Paul drew back and touched each one of his companions in turn. They knew just what the

gesture he made signified. The time for action had come, and they were thus invited to take part with him in the holding up of the desperate pair.

That the tramps belonged to this class of wandering criminals there could not be the least doubt after hearing snatches of their conversation. This affair of Mr. Briggs' store was apparently but one of many similar episodes in their careers.

The little party now proceeded to creep around to the front of the shack. They knew, of course, that the door had been repaired and that it was also closed tightly, but Paul hardly believed they would find any difficulty in pushing it open.

Arriving at the point that was to witness their sudden attack, Paul marshaled his followers in a compact mass. He meant to imitate in some degree the flying wedge used upon the football field with such good effect.

Tolly Tip was given the post of honor in the van. This was done partly because of the fact that he was a man, and the boys felt the tramps would be likely to feel more respect for a company of invaders led by a grown-up.

After the woodsman came Paul and Jud. Jack, Bobolink and Tom Betts formed the base of the triangle which was to push through the opening with all possible speed, once the door had been thrown open.

Even though they found it fastened by some sort of bar or wooden pin, Paul had arranged in his mind just how such fastenings could be broken without trouble. He had noted quite a good-sized log lying near by, used by the vagrants in their seclusion to chop their firewood on. And Paul had decided that this log would make an admirable battering ram. The door was old and feeble, so that one good slam would doubtless hurl it back, and give them free ingress.

There was no need of all this display of energy, however, for upon investigation Paul discovered that he could easily move the door, once he got his hand on the wooden latch.

He only waited to make sure that the others were ready, and then fell back into his pre-arranged place, leaving to Tolly Tip the honor of opening the way.

When the woodsman felt a hand jab him in the short ribs he recognized this as the signal from Paul for which he had been waiting. He immediately threw the door back with such violence that it crashed to the floor, its weak hinges giving way under the strain.

In through the opening the whole six of them poured. The boys' hunting guns were instantly leveled in the direction of the astounded tramps, who started to scramble to their feet, but, cowed

by the display of force, sank back again in dire dismay.

"Hold up your arrms!" roared Tolly Tip, just as he had been instructed to do by the scout-master.

Both hoboes made ludicrous haste to elevate their hands as far as they could. In the excitement of the moment, having only caught glimpses of khaki uniforms, they imagined that a detachment of the State militia had been called out to search the woods for the firebugs guilty of trying to destroy Mr. Briggs' establishment in Stanhope.

By the time they realized that five of the invaders were only boys it was too late to attempt anything like defiance. Besides, those shotguns and rifles, even when held in boyish hands, had just as grim a look as though gripped by grown-up warriors.

"Jud, you've got the thongs I supplied!" called out Paul, "so get busy, with Jack to help you, and tie their hands behind them. Slip those mitts on before you do it, because we've got a long way to go, and it would be cruel to have their fingers frost-bitten on the road to Stanhope."

The men dared not offer any objections, though they kept using strong language, much to the disgust of some of the scouts.

"Paul, tell them that unless they close their mouths and quit that swearing we'll gag them

both," said Jack, unable to endure it any longer.

"I was just about to say that when you took the words out of my mouth!" declared the scoutmaster, indignantly. "I've got a couple of gags ready here, made for the occasion. If you know when you're well off, you fellows, keep still, and accept your fate like men. You're only going to get what you deserve after all."

"It was a bad day for you both when you struck Stanhope," said Jud, with one of his tantalizing grins. "I only wish I knew the tramp signs, so I could write a warning on every fence outside the town so's to keep other hobo yeggs away."

Having accomplished the object of their mission without any trouble they now went back to join their comrades, who were anxiously waiting for the signal Paul was to give in case their help was needed. And great was the disappointment of Bluff, Sandy, Frank, Spider and Phil when they found that they had been left out of the game.

CHAPTER XXXIII

CONCLUSION

ONCE more striking the frozen creek the boys, accompanied by Tolly Tip still, headed down the stream, bent upon reaching Lake Tokala early in the afternoon. The two prisoners were well looked after, though there was little danger of their giving any trouble.

Upon searching them the boys had found some money and several small articles of more or less value that they suspected had been taken from the storekeeper's safe at the time of the robbery. These would perhaps assist materially to convict "Billy" and "Shorty" when the time for their trial came.

The men, stolid, after their kind, seemed to have become reconciled to their fate. Nevertheless, Paul did not mean to relax his vigilance in the least degree. He knew very well that such cunning characters would be ready to take advantage of the least opportunity to break away.

In fact all of the scouts had resolved to be con-

stantly on the watch. They were in imagination already receiving the hearty congratulations from some of the leading townspeople for capturing the guilty rogues, and did not mean to be cheated out of their pleasure through careless handling of the case.

"There's the lake!" announced Jud Elderkin, presently.

"Yes, and I can see smoke coming from the cabin of Abe Turner!" Bobolink hastily added, for he knew just where to look for the humble domicile of the man Mr. Garrity had stationed at the lake to make preliminary preparations for the extensive logging operations he meant to start on the following spring.

Abe heard their shouts and greeted them warmly. Of course, he was interested on discovering that they had captured the two tramps, and admitted that there could be no reasonable doubt of their guilt, once he heard the story, and saw Shorty's scorched hand.

But the boys did not mean to stay over night at the lake. That would make their next day's journey too long, for they hoped to get into Stanhope before the setting of another sun.

Tolly Tip said good-bye sorrowfully. He concluded that he might as well stay with Abe that night for company.

"'Tis harrd to say ye go away, lads," the old woodsman told them, as he wrung each scout's hand with a vim that made him wince. "Depind on it, I'll often think av ivery one av ye as the days crape along. Here's a good luck to the whole bunch! And be sure to remimber me to Mr. Garrity."

"We will, Tolly Tip, and here's three cheers for you!" cried Bobolink; and no doubt the vigorous shouts that arose would ring pleasantly in the ears of the old woodsman for many a day.

The boys managed to cross the lake and use their iceboats in the bargain, for the violence of the wind had kept most of the surface clear of snow. It was a new experience to the two vagrants, and one they hardly fancied; though the boats they were placed on did not make any remarkable time, the breeze being very light.

Once on the Radway river, the boys found it necessary to drag the boats pretty much all the way. They kept on, however, until the sun was setting, and then concluded to camp for the night.

Paul knew that this would be the time when the most danger would arise concerning the possible escape of the prisoners. He was more than ever determined that such a catastrophe should not occur, even if he himself had to sit up and keep watch all through the night.

The boys chose a very good spot for a camp, in that there was an abundance of loose wood at hand that could be used for fuel. Jud also suggested that they build two fires, so that they would have a certain amount of warmth on either side.

"That's a good idea," said Paul, falling in with it immediately, for he saw how it would simplify matters in connection with their prisoners.

He did not dare allow these men to have the freedom of their arms, for there could be no telling what they might not attempt in the desire to gain their freedom. And with their hands tied the lack of circulation might cause their extremities to freeze unless looked after.

Supper was cooked, and things made as cheerful as the conditions allowed. Indeed, most of the boys thought that it was rather in the nature of a novel experience to be forced to sleep amidst the snow banks, and with only a scanty brush shelter between themselves and the clear, cold sky.

Few of them secured much sleep, it may as well be admitted. Paul himslf was on the alert most of the night. Dozens of times his head bobbed up, and his suspicious eyes covered the cowering forms of the two prisoners, who had been placed where they would get the full benefit of the twin fires.

Then again the fires needed frequent attention,

and Paul took it upon himself to see that they did not die down too low; for the night was still bitter cold. As an abundant supply of wood had been gathered by willing hands it was not very hard to toss a few armfuls on each fire from time to time.

Morning came at last, and the scouts were up with the break of day. The fires were again attended to, and breakfast started, for the lads knew they would have a hard day's journey before them.

There was a strong possibility that they would encounter some huge drifts which might block their passage; and it was this that gave Paul the most concern.

It was nearly eleven when they finally sighted the place where the one-time canal merged its waters with the Radway river, forming the connecting link between that waterway and the home stream.

"Looks like an old friend," asserted Jud, when they had turned off the wider stretch and started to follow the canal.

"But see the snow piles ahead of us, will you?" cried Bobolink in dismay. "We're going to have some jolly work climbing through those!"

"If you only look," remarked Paul, "in most cases you'll find you're able to go around the hills that bar your way."

It was very much as Paul said, for, as a rule, they were able to find a passage around the huge drifts. Still progress was very tedious, and when the scouts finally reached the river the afternoon was well along.

"Look! will you?" called out Sandy Griggs, exultantly. "The dear old Bushkill is swept as clear as a barn floor, and the ice is gilt-edged!"

"Why!" echoed Bobolink, equally pleased, "our troubles have vanished just like smoke wreaths. We can run all the way home with this nice breeze that's coming up the river as fair as anything. Whoop! we're in great luck, fellows!"

Stanhope was reached half an hour before sundown. There were a good many people on the ice, mostly boys and girls, and the coming of the iceboat flotilla created something of a stir. This was considerably augmented when it was learned that the scouts who had gone off on a trip to the snow woods had brought back two vagrants, who were responsible for the fire and the robbery that had recently occurred in the town.

Of course, the men were easily convicted with so much evidence against them. Mr. Briggs publicly declared that he was very sorry for saying what he had in connection with the scouts, and that from that time on they could count on him as a friend of the organization.

Some of the boys believed they would never again have the opportunity of engaging in such interesting events as had come their way during the midwinter outing. There were others, however, who declared that such an enterprising group of scouts would surely meet with new adventures while pursuing the study of Nature's mysteries. That these latter were good prophets the reader may learn from the succeeding volume of this series.

At the very next meeting of the Banner Boy Scouts Mr. Thomas Garrity was an honored guest, and had the privilege of hearing an account read that covered all the doings of the ten lads during their midwinter outing.

At the conclusion of the meeting it was only proper that a vote of thanks should be given to their benefactor for his kindness. This was done and was followed by three cheers that made Mr. Garrity's ears ring, and a smile of sympathy for these boyish hearts linger on his lips.

THE END

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